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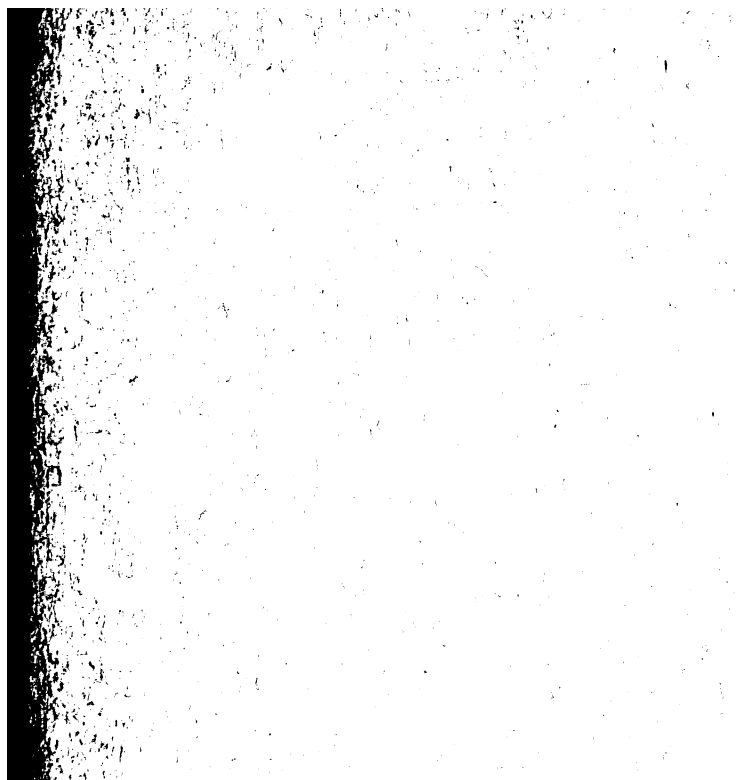
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HILARY ST. IVES.

A NOVEL.

BY

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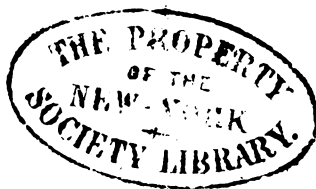
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HILARY ST. IVES.

BOOK I.

MAY.







Lost on a Heath.

ONE evening, at the latter end of April, a few years ago, just as it was becoming dusk, a young man, extremely well favoured and well proportioned, took his way on foot across an extensive heath in one of our southern counties.

Hilary St. Ives—for so was he named—might be about one or two and twenty. Rather dark, perhaps, but strikingly handsome. Features regular and well cut; complexion olive; locks jet black; eyes dark and shaded by long eyelashes that tempered their fire; beard black and of a silken texture. Altogether, as fine a young man as you could desire to see. A Tweed walking suit and round felt hat constituted his costume. Across his broad shoulders were strapped a knapsack and a waterproof coat, and he carried a stout stick in his hand.

Our young traveller was bound for the village of Wootton, which was situated at the further side of the heath, where he had learnt there was a good inn, at which he proposed to rest for the night. He had walked far that day, and having dined early and somewhat sparingly, was quite ready for supper. In fact, the keen air and exercise made him feel ravenously hungry.

As far as ~~he~~ could judge—for he was a stranger to the country—three miles still lay between him and the desired haven. Nothing to so stout a pedestrian as he. But if the distance could be shortened so much the better. He would be sooner at the inn and supper would be sooner set before him.

After looking in the direction where he supposed Wootton lay, and studying, as far as he was able, the intervening ground, he came to the conclusion that a considerable angle might be cut off by quitting the high road, and crossing the heath as a crow would wing its flight over it. All very well in the day-time, but the shades of night were gathering rapidly, and the gloom was increased by a mist that arose from an adjacent marsh.

Hilary, however, had no misgivings—no idea of the risk he might run. He was not aware that between him and Wootton lay a deep and dangerous morass, which could only be safely traversed by one familiar with the locality.

Wootton Heath, though partially reclaimed, still comprehended many miles of wholly uncultivated land. Being undrained, some portions of the waste were marshy, and about half a mile to the left of the road, along which our young traveller was wending his way, lay the extensive morass to which we have just adverted.

On the other side the heath was less swampy, and being covered by a short thymy turf, was well adapted to *sheep pasture*. When enlivened by sunshine, the



wide expanse, purpled by heather, embellished by fern and clusters of tall gorse, with here and there a grey old thorn or a holly, presented a charming picture. The limits of the heath were marked on the right by a broad belt of firs overtopped by the white spire of a newly built church. On the left the boundary was undefined, the village of Wootton being invisible. Three or four little knolls or hillocks rising in the midst of the waste were crowned with clumps of pines, and contributed to the beauty of the landscape.

Before quitting the high road Hilary looked around in quest of some one to direct him to Wootton. Not a human being was in sight. Not a sound was heard, except the bleating of sheep and the distant barking of a watch-dog. The heath was perfectly solitary. However, our young traveller did not hesitate; but striking off on the left, where, as we have explained, the danger lay, he speeded over the elastic turf.

In this manner he had soon accomplished nearly half a mile, without encountering any obstacle, except such as was presented by clumps of gorse, intermingled with briars, and was congratulating himself on his cleverness, when the swampy nature of the ground brought him to a sudden standstill.

Not a minute too soon. Had he taken many steps farther, he would have been engulfed in the treacherous morass. He understood his danger, and perceiving that the quagmire must be impassable, and not liking to

skirt it, he turned back, as much provoked with himself as he had previously been well satisfied.

He endeavoured to regain the high road, which he had so imprudently quitted, but bewildered by the gloom—for it was now quite dark—he failed in discovering it, and after wandering about for nearly half an hour, again found himself on the verge of the morass.

This was indeed vexatious. But confident that by pursuing a straight course he must eventually reach the road, he turned back at once. Unluckily, his course was *not* straight. Without being aware of it, he deviated from the direct line, and to his infinite surprise and mortification, found himself, for the third time, on the borders of the morass.

He was now quite confounded, and began to think he must be condemned to move in a magic circle.

Another half hour found him only more hopelessly involved. By no efforts could he discover the road, though he appeared to have no difficulty in finding the morass. Uneasy thoughts beset him. He shuddered at the idea of passing the night on the dark and dreary heath. But he soon took heart. Though constantly baffled, he would not succumb, until forced to do so by sheer exhaustion.

Vainly did he attempt to extricate himself from the magic circle. As surely as he went on, so surely did he come back to the inevitable point. At last, he was brought to a halt. Carefully as he proceeded, he contrived to roll down a hollow, and when he re-

covered from the fall he sat down on the brink of the pit to reflect; the bitterness of his reflections being aggravated by the tantalising picture summoned up by his fancy of the snug parlour at the inn, with the hot supper in preparation.

Heavens! how hungry he felt. Springing to his feet he set off again, but presently got entangled in a thick cluster of gorse.

But help was now at hand. While he was struggling out of the gorse, voices reached his ears, and he instantly hastened in the direction whence the sounds proceeded, shouting lustily as he went.

Instead of responding to his outcries, the interlocutors became suddenly mute, and the darkness did not permit him to distinguish them.

After a moment's pause, he called out again. This time, a gruff voice demanded who he was, and what he wanted? Hilary replied that he was a traveller, who had lost his way on the heath, and pressing on as he spoke, soon descried two sturdy-looking vagabonds, who were standing in a more open spot, tranquilly awaiting his approach. The fellows were roughly clad, and had the appearance of gipsies, and their looks and deportment inspired Hilary with distrust. On their part, the gipsies eyed him narrowly.

As he came up, the surly fellow who had first addressed him, asked if he wanted to be smothered in the bog, that he ventured near it on so dark a night.

"I have no such desire," replied Hilary. "Like a fool I must needs quit the high road, and I have paid

the penalty for my folly by being kept wandering about on the brink of the marsh for two hours at least."

"Ho! ho!" laughed the gipsy. "Pleasant pastime on a dark night. You may thank your stars it's no worse. It's easier to get into a bog than to get out of it, as many a poor devil has found to his cost."

"I want to go to Wootton!" cried Hilary, who did not like this jesting; "will you show me the way?"

"The nearest way lies straight on," said the man.

"Why that will take me to the marsh!" cried Hilary.

"To be sure it will!" exclaimed the other gipsy, with a coarse laugh. "Seth Cooper is gammoning you. You must go round about, if you want to get safely to Wootton."

"Why need you trouble yourself about him, Reuben!" cried Seth Cooper. "What is it to you if he should be drowned."

"Not much, certainly. Still——"

"Will half a crown tempt you to show me the road?" interrupted Hilary.

"I should say not," returned Seth Cooper. "Do you rate your life at only half a crown's valley?"

"Make it half a crown a-piece," quoth Reuben, who seemed of milder mood than his companion, "and we'll consider about it."

"Well," cried the young man, "put me in the right way to Wootton, and you shall have what you ask."

"Money down, or we don't budge," cried Seth Cooper.

"No," rejoined Hilary, in a determined tone. "Bring me to the high road, and I'll pay you. But not a stiver till then."

Seth made some growling observations, but his companion signified his assent to the young man's proposal, and the pair at once moved off, bearing towards the right. Hilary, who had now quite recovered his energies, followed them.

After trudging along in silence for a few minutes, Reuben hung back, and in a more civil tone than he had previously adopted, inquired of Hilary if he had travelled far that day?

"Farther than you would like to travel on foot, I reckon," replied the young man.

"Then you must have had a long tramp," returned Reuben, laughing. "Many's the time I've done my forty miles, and been none the worse for it."

"But you warn't incommoded with a heavy knapsack," remarked Seth Cooper, turning round. "Why don't you offer to carry it for the gemman?"

"Come, no nonsense!" cried Hilary, sternly. "Leave my knapsack alone. You'd best."

"Why, what's the matter?" rejoined Seth. "Do you think we want to rob you—eh?"

"You would find it no easy job if you made the attempt. Move on, I say, and keep well in front."

But instead of complying, both men stopped.

"It seems you don't like our company, master," remarked Reuben. "That being the case, you'd better go on alone."

"You made a bargain with me, and I expect you to fulfil your part of it, as I mean to fulfil mine," said Hilary, in a bold, authoritative tone. "I insist upon your conducting me to the high road."

"First tell us what you've got in that ere knapsack," remarked Seth. "We should like to know."

"Would you? Then I don't intend to gratify your curiosity. I would fain believe you to be honest men."

"Why, what else do you take us for?" cried Seth, fiercely. "Out with it. Let's know your mind."

His manner clearly intimated violence, but his comrade dragged him off, and they went on as before. The high road was not far distant, and on reaching it, they both faced about.

"That's the way to Wootton," said Reuben. "We'll now wish you good night."

"Not afore he has settled with us," cried Seth.

While Hilary was searching for the money, Seth rushed suddenly upon him, and seizing him by the throat, with a choking gripe, bore him to the ground. Hilary struggled desperately, and would have freed himself, if Reuben had not come to his comrade's assistance.

Seth then possessed himself of the stick, and beat the luckless young man with it about the head till he rendered him insensible.

The two ruffians next proceeded to despoil their victim, took off his knapsack, and were proceeding to empty his pockets and pluck the guard-chain from his neck, when the noise of wheels alarmed them.

A dog-cart was coming on at a quick pace, and its lamp, together with the light of the cigars they were smoking, showed there were two persons in the vehicle. These persons appeared to be known to Reuben, for he remarked to his comrade, who was still kneeling upon his victim's chest,

"It's old Radcliffe, of Hazlemere, and his nevey, young Oswald Woodcot. We must be off. But first let us drag the poor devil out of the road, or he'll be run over."

"Never mind if he is," rejoined Seth Cooper. "If I'd had my own way, we should have done the job where me met him, and then we could have flung the body into the bog, and no more would have been heard of him."

Here the rapid advance of the dog-cart forced him to abandon part of his booty, and he disappeared with his comrade amid the furze-bushes.

The disaster apprehended by Reuben seemed imminent. Luckily, however, Mr. Radcliffe descried the body of the unfortunate young man lying in the middle of the road and pulled up just in time.

"Who-oh, Spanker!" he cried. "What's that, a sack, or a man? Get down, Oswald, and see what it is."

His nephew flung away his cigar, descended at once, and immediately afterwards called out, in accents of horror,

"It's a man—murdered, I fear."

"Murdered! bless me! I hope not," cried Mr.

Radcliffe, who was likewise greatly horrified. "Take the lamp, Oswald, and make a careful examination. I'd get down myself, but, as you know, Spanker won't stand."

And, as if to confirm the statement, the mettlesome horse snorted, and exhibited signs of impatience.

"He's a young man, uncle—a very fine young man," exclaimed Oswald, throwing the light of the lamp upon Hilary's pallid and blood-stained visage. "Roughly handled, but not dead. He breathes, and I think may recover. It would seem that he has only just been attacked, and probably we have disturbed his assailants."

"Why do you imagine the poor fellow has been attacked by more than one person, Oswald?"

"For this reason, uncle. Such a powerfully built young fellow, as he appears to be, would have beaten any ordinary ruffian, unless he had been taken un-awares."

"Have you any idea who he is?"

"Not the least. Never saw him before. He looks like a gentleman. There's a signet ring on his finger. I wonder the villains didn't take it. Perhaps they hadn't time, for they've left his watch and guard-chain. What's to be done, uncle? We can't leave him here."

"Of course not," rejoined Mr. Radcliffe. "It's a mercy I didn't run over him. I should never have forgiven myself if I had."

"Well, uncle, the best plan will be for you to drive *as fast as you can* to Malham's, the surgeon's at Woot-

ton, and procure assistance. I'll stay with the poor fellow."

"No, no; that won't do. The villains may be lurking about. If we could only manage to get him into the dog-cart, we might take him to the surgery. Can he move at all?"

"I'll see."

As Oswald, who was a stalwart young fellow himself, essayed to lift the injured man, the latter exhibited some slight consciousness, but he was so stunned and confused that considerable difficulty was experienced in getting him into the dog-cart. This being accomplished at last, he was sustained by Oswald, while Mr. Radcliffe drove on at a quick pace towards Wootton.

As they speeded over the heath, the rapidity of the motion in some degree revived Hilary, and he endeavoured to explain what had befallen him. Mr. Radcliffe and his nephew, however, deemed it prudent not to put too many questions to him.

On reaching Wootton, Mr. Radcliffe drove at once to the surgery. Luckily, Mr. Malham was within, and having carefully washed the coagulated blood from the wounded man's dark locks and sponged his brow, he pronounced that he was not seriously injured. There was no fracture of the skull. A stimulant administered to the sufferer tended greatly to restore him.

Meantime, Oswald, leaving the injured man to the care of the surgeon, set off in quest of the police, and he now returned with an officer, to whom Hilary detailed all particulars of the murderous attack made

upon him, describing his assailants as well as he could, and mentioning the names by which they had addressed each other.

Wormald, the officer, who seemed an active and intelligent man, listened attentively to what was told him, and remarked that he had no doubt the men were gipsies—Cooper being a common name among the vagabonds. Wootton Heath, he said, was infested by the vagabonds. Two men, answering to the description given of the robbers, had been seen about the village lately. They were tinkers. Wormald felt certain he should be able to effect their capture before morning.

"I hope I shall recover my knapsack," said Hilary. "It contains nothing of any value, except some papers, which are of great importance to myself. I would rather lose a good sum of money than those documents."

On hearing this, the officer looked rather grave, and so did Mr. Radcliffe.

"Excuse me, sir," remarked Wormald, "for saying that you ought not to have placed important documents in a knapsack."

"Certainly not," observed Mr. Radcliffe, shaking his head.

"Yes, I feel I did wrong," said Hilary.

"Well, I don't think you will lose them, as they can't be of any value to these rascals," said the officer.

"You mustn't let the scent get cold, Wormald," *cried Oswald*. "The sooner you give chase the better."

"I can guess pretty well where I'm likely to meet with the rogues, sir," said the officer, confidently. "I and my mate, Barker, will mount and be on their track in less than ten minutes. But you haven't yet told me your name, sir."

"Hilary St. Ives—that's my name," replied the young man.

"From Cornwall?" inquired Oswald.

"No," replied the other; but he gave no further information. "You'll find me at the inn," he added to the officer.

"No, you won't, Wormald," cried Mr. Radcliffe. "You'll find Mr. St. Ives at Hazlemere. I mean to take him home with me."

"All right, sir," replied the officer. And with a salute he departed.

"You won't be in bad quarters at Hazlemere, I can promise you, Mr. St. Ives," observed Oswald. "My uncle, though I say it to his face, is the jolliest old gentleman in the county."

"At all events, you'll be more comfortable with me than you would be at the George, though you wouldn't be badly off there," said Mr. Radcliffe. "My house-keeper, Mrs. Sutton, will take good care of you—eh, Malham?"

"Mr. St. Ives couldn't be in better hands than Mrs. Sutton's," returned the surgeon. "And he *will* require a nurse, for he mustn't expect to escape without a little fever. It wouldn't surprise me if he were laid up for two or three days."

"You hear that, Mr. Radcliffe," said Hilary. "Doesn't that alarm you?"

"Not in the least. Mrs. Sutton is an excellent nurse, as Mr. Malham can testify."

"That I can, sir. Though Mr. St. Ives has had the ill luck to be knocked down, he has contrived to fall on his legs."

"Gad, Malham, it's uncommonly lucky we happened to be passing at the time. My nephew and I have been to Binfield—intending merely to make a call—but Tom Irby persuaded us to stay dinner, and we were getting back as fast as Spanker could take us—and you know how well he goes—when we came upon this poor young fellow lying in the middle of the road. Another minute, and it would have been all over with him—but we won't think of that. Here he is."

"I feel I am indebted to you, sir, and to your nephew for the preservation of my life," said Hilary, earnestly. "I am truly sensible of your kindness. But I really am not in a condition to avail myself of your hospitality. Having lost my knapsack, I have not even a change of linen."

"Poh! Oswald will supply all your wants in that respect."

"That I will, with the greatest pleasure," said the young man. "You shall have the pick of my wardrobe, Mr. St. Ives, and as we're about the same size, my things will fit you."

"All's settled," cried his uncle. "Help our young friend into the dog-cart."

Hilary made some further remonstrances, but the worthy old gentleman overruled them, and glancing at his nephew, the latter assisted Hilary to arise, and the two young men went out of the surgery together.

Mr. Radcliffe tarried to have a parting word with the surgeon.

"Anything to say to me, Malham?" he asked.

"Not much, sir," replied the surgeon. "You may make up your mind to have this young man at Hazlemere for three or four days, or a week. He's certain to have fever, and it won't be long in coming on. No need for alarm, though. No mischief has been done. He has been knocked about the head pretty severely, but his skull is luckily as thick as an Irishman's, and not easily cracked. I needn't prescribe for him. You have only to explain the case to Mrs. Sutton. She has a medicine chest, and will know what to give him."

"Ay, Mrs. Sutton beats you all hollow, Malham," cried Mr. Radcliffe, with a laugh. "She likes to act as nurse."

"Mrs. Sutton is a very clever woman, and a very good woman, and if I got hurt, I should like her to nurse me—that's all I can say."

"She's invaluable to us, Malham," cried the old gentleman, tears of gratitude springing to his eyes. "She has lived with us for nineteen years—ever since my darling May was born—and we have never had a fault to find with her. As you know, my dear wife has always been *an invalid*. A nurse is a necessity to

her, and she has found the best of nurses in Mrs. Sutton. Without her unremitting care and attention—and skill, Malham, skill—Mrs. Radcliffe wouldn't be alive now."

It seemed a pleasure to the old gentleman to sing his housekeeper's praises. A pleasure, also, to the surgeon to listen to them.

"You may with truth assert, sir," he rejoined, "that, but for Mrs. Sutton's care, your wife would not be alive now."

Emotion kept Mr. Radcliffe silent. He brushed his eyes, and said, "You'll come over to see this young fellow in the morning, Malham?"

"I'll come to see how he gets on, since you desire it, sir; but I'm sure Mrs. Sutton will treat him properly."

"At all events, she'll be very glad to consult with you. You're a great favourite of hers, Malham."

The surgeon smiled and bowed.

"I wonder who the deuce this young St. Ives can be? and where he comes from? I don't know whether you remarked it, but he seemed rather shy in giving any information about himself to my nephew. I'm certain he's a gentleman, or I wouldn't take him home with me."

"A gentleman, no doubt, sir. Don't excite him by any questions to-night. He's not exactly himself. We shall learn all about him, by and by. Get him to bed as soon as you can."

Nothing more passed. Mr. Radcliffe bade the sur-

geon good night, and shook hands with him. On going forth, he found that his nephew and Hilary were already seated in the dog-cart. Mr. Malham's groom was standing at Spanker's head. Taking the reins from the man, Mr. Radcliffe got into the vehicle more actively than might have been expected from so stout a personage, and drove off.

Hazlemere was about a mile and a half distant from Wootton, and while they are on the way thither, we shall take the opportunity of offering a brief description of the place, and saying a few words about its occupants.

II.

Mrs. Sutton.

HAZLEMERE HOUSE was a large, commodious, red-brick mansion, built, towards the close of the last century, by the present owner's grandsire—a merchant of the City of London. The site had been well chosen, in the midst of a lovely country. Though the house was comparatively modern, not being more than seventy years old, there was fine timber around it; the gardens were extensive, and the grounds well laid out. At no great distance, there was a miniature lake, from which the place derived its name. "To sum up," as the worthy old cit, who reared it, used to say, it was a delightful country house.

Like his sire and grandsire, our friend, Mr. Theobald Radcliffe, had been in business in the City, but had retired several years ago, and now lived entirely at Hazlemere. His wife, as we have seen, was a great invalid, and never left home. She would not stir without Mrs. Sutton, and Mrs. Sutton did not like to leave Hazlemere. Mr. Radcliffe had no son; but he had something far better—a most charming daughter.

Her father was very proud of her, and he might well be so. May Radcliffe had a thousand attractive qualities which it would take pages to enumerate. She *must have had* some faults, we suppose, but her father

could never discern them. He thought her perfection. She was exceedingly amiable, and her nature was so joyous that she seemed to diffuse happiness wherever she went. Her light laughter was the pleasantest music in her father's ears, though he liked also to listen to her sweet voice as she touched the piano. May was a favourite with everybody in the house, except Mrs. Sutton. The exception may appear incomprehensible, seeing that Mrs. Sutton had nursed her during infancy, and watched over her ever since, and might naturally be supposed to have almost a mother's love for her. But so it was. Mrs. Sutton had once doated upon her; but her feelings of late had undergone a change. She did not, however, allow this change to appear, but treated May with every semblance of affection, and seemed anxious as ever to gratify her slightest wish.

But May was not to be deceived. She detected the change. What had she done to forfeit her dear old nurse's love? She could not tell. But the idea made her unhappy, and being wholly incapable of concealment, she confessed her uneasiness to the author of it, promising, if she had offended in any way, to make instant reparation. "Tell me what it is, dear Mrs. Sutton," she cried. "You know how dearly I love you."

Mrs. Sutton looked surprised and hurt, and reproached her gently, telling her she was a silly child to entertain any such nonsensical notion. She then kissed her affectionately, and assured her, with a look that carried *conviction with it*, that she loved her better

than any one in the world, except her dear mistress. Secretly, perhaps, Mrs. Sutton did not love either of them overmuch. But she played her part so well, that she effectually dissipated all May's misgivings.

Mrs. Radcliffe was the youngest daughter of Mr. Page Thornton, a flourishing solicitor of Chester. Both the Miss Thorntons were considered belles in their day, and had been much admired by the youth of Chester, as well as by the officers quartered in the ancient city of Hugh Lupus. Both married well, though neither was united to the man she herself would have chosen. Isabella, the eldest, became the second wife of Dr. Woodcot, an eminent physician in Manchester. But of her anon. Esther Thornton, who had been a great flirt, and had had we know not how many entanglements, managed to captivate Mr. Radcliffe, whom she met at a ball at Liverpool. Mr. Radcliffe was double Esther's age; but that did not matter; he was a wealthy merchant, and when he followed her to Chester, and proposed, Mr. Thornton, who was tired out by so many flirtations that came to nothing, insisted upon her accepting him. She did so, and gave up Captain Delacombe, who became distracted. Like a sensible fellow as he was, Mr. Radcliffe did not trouble himself with his wife's former flirtations, but esteemed himself eminently fortunate in possessing such a charming creature.

Esther had been always extremely delicate, and after the birth of May she became a confirmed invalid. *A young widow*, unembarrassed by a family, was re-

commended to her as a nurse. This was Mrs. Sutton, who had never since quitted the family, and had really become a very important member of it. It is questionable whether she had most influence with Mrs. Radcliffe or her husband. Both were governed by her without being aware of it. Mrs. Sutton at the time of her entrance into the family, and assumption of the duties of nurse and housekeeper, for she filled both offices, was about five-and-twenty—perhaps not quite so much—but she called herself five-and-twenty. She never gave any particulars of her previous history, nor were they asked for, out of consideration for her feelings, it being understood that her marriage had been unhappy. Her countenance long wore a shade of melancholy, but this wore off in time. She was perfectly well educated, and had the manners of a gentlewoman; but though evidently superior to her situation, she fulfilled all its duties, and became, as her mistress declared, a model nurse and a model housekeeper. Plain of feature, she was not without personal attraction, for her figure was good, her hair dark and fine, her complexion very fair, and her teeth beautifully white and even. Her hands and feet were small and well formed. Such charms as she possessed she contrived to preserve in a very wonderful manner, and indeed she seemed rather to improve than deteriorate by age. She dressed very plainly and consistently, but was so neat that what she wore always became her. Mrs. Radcliffe used often to say that she could never get a dress to fit her in the same way that Mrs. Sutton's

dresses did. Her manner was extremely quiet and prepossessing. At first Mrs. Sutton had had the care of May, but Mrs. Radcliffe's delicate state of health demanded her exclusive care, and another nurse was engaged. Gradually she rose to an important position in the house, but as she never made her power unpleasantly manifest, she was liked by the whole household, of whom she was in effect mistress, for Mrs. Radcliffe was too feeble to attempt the management, and Mr. Radcliffe, who was quite aware of his wife's incompetency, was well pleased that she should be thus efficiently represented. Mrs. Radcliffe entrusted her keys and her purse to her housekeeper, kept nothing from her in fact, and was constantly making her handsome presents. Mrs. Sutton was her confidante and counsellor, and as she possessed a far stronger mind than her mistress, her ascendancy became complete. But as May grew up Mrs. Sutton began to fear she might be supplanted. Hence her jealousy of the amiable and unoffending girl, to whom she had previously been so fondly attached. She could brook no interference. Never would she relinquish the keys—never submit to have her authority restricted or controlled. The sole plan of removing her young and dangerous rival was to get her married, and she had no doubt that this could be speedily accomplished. Already May had plenty of suitors, but she seemed to care for none of them. Mrs. Sutton, however, relied upon Cousin Oswald.

And now a few words as to this young gentleman.

Oswald Woodcot was the only son of Mrs. Radcliffe's sister Isabella, who had now been some ten years a widow. Mrs. Woodcot was not very well off, her late husband having left the bulk of his property to his children by his first wife. Her son, therefore, was indebted for the excellent education he had received to his grandfather, Mr. Thornton, of Chester, who was still alive, and still in business, though an old man. Oswald was destined for the bar, and had every prospect of success, owing to his grandfather's interest and connexions; but he had a distaste to the legal profession, though he didn't care to avow it to Mr. Thornton. The old solicitor, who was very rich, and talked of making him his heir, might change his mind, if he displeased him. Mrs. Woodcot would have liked to see her son in the army, but of course this was out of the question, unless Mr. Thornton's consent could be obtained, and it being quite certain he would strongly oppose the plan, it was never mentioned to him, and the idea was abandoned. It was pretty clear, however, that Oswald would never make a figure at the bar, and this his shrewd old grandfather had already begun to suspect. Mrs. Woodcot had another plan in regard to her son, which she persuaded herself could be easily carried out, which would materially better his prospects, and at the same time ensure his happiness. This was to bring about a match between him and her only niece, May Radcliffe. She really saw no difficulty in the matter. The young people seemed made for each other. Oswald was a very handsome young

fellow—at least, in his mother's opinion—just three years older than his charming cousin, and his disposition was so kind and good that he could not fail to make her happy. The fortune, it is true, was all on May's side, for she could give her son little or nothing; but had he not great expectations from his grandfather, who had almost announced his intention of making him his heir, and who might be induced to do something at once, if the marriage were arranged? Thus the fond mother argued, and her son was quite of the same opinion, for he was over head and ears in love with his lovely cousin.

Aware of the danger of making a false step in a matter so important—aware also of Mrs. Sutton's influence over her sister, and indeed over Mr. Radcliffe, Mrs. Woodcot endeavoured to secure the housekeeper's assistance, and urged Oswald to conciliate her by every means in his power. Mrs. Sutton—for reasons we have already explained—met him half-way, and soon showed that she was ready to become his ally. Oswald therefore seemed in a fair way of success. But he had not, as yet, received sufficient encouragement from May to warrant a formal declaration. She liked him very much, and was always very happy and cheerful in his society, but she seemed only to regard him as a cousin. Oswald was therefore perplexed, but Mrs. Sutton encouraged him, though at the same time she recommended him not to be precipitate. Meantime, the housekeeper had cautiously sounded her mistress, and had ascertained that there was no dis-

inclination on her part to the match. Mrs. Radcliffe thought the young people were well suited to each other, and she would not be sorry to have May happily married, though she felt sure Mr. Radcliffe would not like to part with her. Nor was she wrong. When the plan was hinted to him by his wife, he laughed at it, and hoped Oswald had got no such foolish notion into his head. If he thought so, he should be obliged to forbid him the house, and he should be very sorry to do that, on all accounts. He had got a husband for May in his eye; but he did not intend her to marry just at present. Mr. Radcliffe was rather self-willed, and any immediate opposition would only have made him more obstinate. Mrs. Sutton understood him very well, and knew she could get over the difficulty. But May's heart must first be won. That grand point had yet to be achieved.

Oswald had plenty of opportunity of winning his fair cousin's affections. He was always welcome at Hazlemere, and indeed just as much at home with his uncle, who sincerely liked him, though he objected to him as a son-in-law, as he was with his mother. He therefore came when it suited him, and stayed as long as he pleased. As we have shown, he did not trouble himself much about his profession. He had not even chambers in town. His mother resided in a prettily-situated cottage at Bowdon, in Cheshire, and he made her house his head-quarters. He was fond of hunting and shooting, and as he knew a good many of the Cheshire squires, and visited them, he could always

get a mount, though he could not afford to keep a horse, and as much shooting as he wanted. But with the attraction which it now offered him, we may suppose that he passed most of his time at Hazlemere. Besides wooing his fair cousin, he paid great court to his aunt, made himself as agreeable as he could to his uncle, and did not, we may be sure, neglect Mrs. Sutton. He wrote, now and then, to report progress to his mother—but he could not send her the intelligence she longed for. All, however, was going on prosperously, and Mrs. Sutton was secretly at work for him.

Such was the position of things at Hazlemere, at the time we are about to enter the house, and make acquaintance with its inmates.

We will now return to the party in the dog-cart, whom we left on the way to Hazlemere. Long before they arrived there, Hilary became exceedingly faint, and his head fell upon Oswald's shoulder. Rather alarmed, Mr. Radcliffe accelerated his pace, and soon reached his destination. The lodge gates were open, but instead of pursuing the drive that led to the principal entrance of the mansion, Mr. Radcliffe took a side road to the stables, and committing the injured man to the care of his nephew, and giving some hasty directions to the coachman, who had rushed forth on his arrival, he hurried into the house to prepare Mrs. Sutton for her unexpected patient.

Shortly afterwards, Hilary was led into the house, supported between Oswald and the coachman. He *was now almost unconscious*, but as he was borne

across the spacious hall, the vision of a lovely girl, who seemed to take great interest in him, flitted before his swimming gaze. He saw nothing more. He was taken up-stairs, and transported to a chamber which had been hastily prepared for his reception by Mrs. Sutton.

Hilary passed a very disturbed night. He slept for a few hours, but when he awoke fever had come on. He was quite light-headed, and rambled strangely in his talk. Mrs. Sutton, who had watched anxiously by his couch, and was alone with him at the time, listened with breathless interest to his ravings. A few words which he had let fall fixed her attention, and rising softly from her seat, she drew nearer to him, and gazed eagerly and inquiringly into his face.

Had Mr. Radcliffe seen her at this moment he would not have known her, so changed was her aspect. Her usual calm expression was gone, and had given place to a look of intense emotion such as she never exhibited.

What thoughts passed through her breast as she pursued this agonising scrutiny we shall not inquire. Her emotion became so violent that she feared it would master her. But she neither cried out, nor fell. Her senses seemed wrapped in the object before her. While she yet gazed at him, incapable of stirring, though so profoundly agitated, the sufferer ceased to rave, and his breathing soon proclaimed that he once more slumbered.

Her life appeared to hang upon the step she next

took. Bending forward, and carefully raising the coverlet—so carefully that she did not disturb the sleeper—she laid bare the lower part of his neck, and then discovered the mark she sought.

All doubts were now removed. Her strength deserted her, and she sank back in the chair completely overcome by emotion.

When she recovered, she found that the sufferer was awake and gazing at her with vacant wonder. Her sobs, which she could not check, had roused him. She immediately got up, and with as much firmness as she could command, offered him a cooling draught. He drank it eagerly, and as he gazed earnestly in her face she had great difficulty in refraining from throwing herself upon his neck. But she took his hand, and held it till he again slumbered; and she then kissed his burning brow.

According to his promise, Mr. Malham came in the morning to see the injured man. By this time the fever had increased, and Hilary's pulse was very high, but the surgeon declared there was no occasion for alarm, and proceeded to dress the sufferer's wounds, and this seemed to afford him sensible relief. Mr. Malham was rather surprised by Mrs. Sutton's anxiety about her patient. He assured her there was no danger, and she could not have treated him better. He smiled as he said this, as if admitting her superior skill. Mr. Malham was a widower, and was looking out for another wife. Despite his assurance, she still appeared

grave and anxious. "My dear madam," he said, giving her hand a gentle professional squeeze, "there is really no cause for uneasiness. You are sure to bring him round."

"I should like to have a word with you before you go, Mr. Malham," she rejoined.

"As many as you please, dear madam," he replied, following her into a dressing-room which opened out of the bed-chamber.

She then obtained from him full particulars as to the attack that had been made by the gipsies upon Mr. St. Ives, and learnt, further, that the police had been hitherto unsuccessful in capturing the robbers.

"Wormald was very confident last night," said the surgeon, "but I saw him only an hour ago, and he was still quite at fault. The rascals have got off. Don't say anything to our patient, as it may excite him and retard his cure, but I fear he will lose his knapsack, and according to his own account it contained some documents of great importance to him."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Mrs. Sutton. "Then it is to be hoped he may recover it. Pray who is the young gentleman?"

"Your curiosity about him is very natural, dear madam, and I regret I cannot gratify it. We are all in the dark about him. He gave no account of himself last night, and Mr. Radcliffe was too considerate to ask any questions."

"But I thought he might have said something——"

"He didn't even state where he came from. He merely mentioned his name—Hilary St. Ives."

"I never heard the name before," remarked Mrs. Sutton.

"Nor I," observed the surgeon. "There is no family of that name hereabouts. If I had any notion who he is, I would write to his friends."

"We must wait till he is able to give the necessary explanation," said Mrs. Sutton. "And I think you will agree with me, that it is best he should not be disturbed to-day—by any one."

"I quite agree with you, dear madam. Just what I, myself, should have recommended. He must be kept quiet—perfectly quiet. I'll enjoin Mr. Radcliffe and Mr. Oswald not to come near him, without your sanction."

And he again smiled tenderly, implying that he would do anything to please her.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Malham," she rejoined. "I won't detain you any longer. Of course I shall see you to-morrow morning?"

"Of course, since you desire it. Ah! dear madam," he sighed, "I feel sometimes very lonely in my widowed home."

Mrs. Sutton took no notice of the remark, but ushered him to the door, and he was obliged reluctantly to depart.

Mr. Malham's injunctions were strictly obeyed. Neither Mr. Radcliffe nor his nephew entered the room occupied by the wounded man. Mrs. Sutton

remained with him all day, and attended him with maternal solicitude. His ravings were unheard by any one but herself.

Towards evening the fever began to abate.

III.

Mrs. Radcliffe.

MRS. RADCLIFFE was in her boudoir, where she always passed the morning, and very often the entire day. The room in which the invalid lady spent so much time was charmingly fitted up, the whole of the furniture being Parisian. While elegance was studied, comfort was not neglected. The boudoir was luxurious as well as tasteful. So soft were the sofas and easy chairs, that they seemed stuffed with eider-down. Delicious little groups copied from Watteau, in Sèvres china, and the prettiest of pendules, likewise of china, graced the chimney-piece, which was covered with blue velvet, and had curtain screens of the same stuff to moderate the heat of the fire. The skin of a superb tiger, which had been shot in India by Captain Delacombe, lay upon the hearth. Beautiful bronzes adorned the pier-tables, and rare objects of art were displayed in open cabinets. Choice water-colour pictures added to the attractions in the room, and miniatures were hung on either side of the mantel-piece. Rose-coloured curtains subdued the light, and cast a warm glow on the pale cheeks of the invalid. The windows looked out upon the garden, but were rarely opened, *for Mrs. Radcliffe could not endure a breath of air.*

As far as possible an equable temperature was maintained, but it was the temperature of a hothouse, or of an Indian bungalow. Mrs. Radcliffe being a hot-house plant, enjoyed this high temperature. Other people, however, found it inconvenient, and Mr. Radcliffe never remained in his wife's boudoir more than ten minutes, without complaining of headache.

The invalid and indolent lady of Hazlemere passed her life in a pleasant dream, from which she did not care to be aroused. She did not desire rude health, which would have necessitated exertion, and she disliked all exertion; but she would fain have preserved her youth and beauty. She took no exercise on foot. Occasionally she drove out in the close carriage to make a call; and when she went forth into the garden, she was wheeled about in a Bath chair. Yet she was really not quite so feeble as she fancied herself. Owing to the great care taken of her by Mrs. Sutton, her health was partially restored. The pulmonary symptoms, that had once threatened her, had disappeared. But she liked to be considered delicate. It served as an excuse for her indolence. A great reader of novels—French as well as English—her mind was tintured by the class of literature to which she was addicted, and wanted bracing as much as her body. As we have shown, she troubled herself as little as possible about household concerns, and left the management of them entirely to Mrs. Sutton. The nature of a person so constituted could not be otherwise than intensely selfish, yet she was amiable and

...at the end of the day. She was
...intending
...in the garden. Mrs.
...and she decidedly
...some-what indec-
...and her sister. And received
...was still conscious
...from an
...and
...her
...and her hands and feet
...above
...and tender-
...from
...Father Thomson of
...reference to a man-
...William Newton, placed near the
...bright-
...the expression of her features
...as she was. Mrs. Rad-
...attractive, and might even now
...in the breast of some romantic
...she was quite as beauti-
...added her.

...had never loved her husband, but
...in her married life. Mr. Rad-
...as we are aware,
...so indulgent, so anxious
...that it was impossible not
...again, being so great an invalid,

to partly
to the film

She could not mix with society, and had no opportunity of flirting as a married woman, even if she had been inclined to do so. Perhaps her feeble state of health was rather a fortunate circumstance for Mr. Radcliffe. But if we must penetrate into the secret recesses of her breast, we shall discover that she still nourished a tender feeling for Captain Seymour Delacombe, who had been undoubted master of her heart. She had never, however, seen him since her marriage.

Immediately after that event, he had gone out to India, and had been there ever since; but she had corresponded with him—of course, with her husband's sanction. Seymour had sought death, it appeared, in many a siege and sharp conflict, but had not found it. On the contrary, he had gained honour and promotion, and was now Colonel Delacombe, C.B.

Mrs. Radcliffe had watched his brilliant career with great interest, but what chiefly gratified her was that he never married. When they parted, twenty years ago, he had vowed, since he could not be blessed with her, never to take another to his breast. And he had kept his vow.

On that afflicting occasion he had given her his miniature, which was now to be seen in the boudoir, hung near the chimney-piece, on the opposite side to her own. To judge from this portrait, Seymour Delacombe must have been exceedingly handsome, with fine dark eyes, a dark complexion, and regular features, marked by a very haughty expression. He was about

five-and-twenty at the time. It may seem strange that Mr. Radcliffe should allow the portrait of one whom he knew had been desperately in love with his wife to hang up in her boudoir. He did not altogether like to see the miniature, but he wisely argued that it might as well be there, as locked up in a drawer.

But if he disregarded this miniature, Mrs. Sutton had an unaccountable dislike to it. She avoided looking at it, and never would admit that she thought it the portrait of a handsome man.

"Ah! you should have seen Seymour when this was taken!" Mrs. Radcliffe often exclaimed. "You could not fail to have been struck by him. He was thought the handsomest man of his day."

Mrs. Sutton replied that he might be handsome, but she didn't like the expression of his countenance.

Upon one occasion, however, when Mrs. Radcliffe entered the boudoir unexpectedly, she caught the house-keeper gazing steadfastly at the miniature.

Despite her habitual self-command, Mrs. Sutton started when thus detected, her embarrassment being increased by her mistress's raillery.

Mrs. Sutton had frequently—far too frequently for her peace—to listen to Mrs. Radcliffe's description of her love-passages with Seymour Delacombe. The house-keeper manifested little interest in these tender and touching details. Apparently, she did not believe in the sincerity of the gallant captain's passion, or in his vows of eternal constancy, for she sometimes smiled rather contemptuously when they were repeated.

"You look incredulous, Sutton," said her mistress. "But you see he has never married."

"There may have been reasons for his not marrying," remarked the housekeeper, dryly.

"What reasons?" cried the lady. "None—save his vow to me."

The same slightly contemptuous smile, that had just before curled Mrs. Sutton's lip, again appeared for an instant.

"You would do well, I think, to forget him," she said.

"I cannot forget him," rejoined Mrs. Radcliffe.

Mrs. Sutton gave her a look, which it was lucky the other did not understand. It was certainly not a look of sympathy. It was rather a look of ill-concealed hate. Had not Mrs. Radcliffe been occupied by her own thoughts, she must have remarked it.

Mrs. Radcliffe, as we have said, was in her charming boudoir, seated in a fauteuil, with her tiny feet supported by a velvet tabouret. With the help of a double eye-glass, of the most graceful workmanship, she was reading the *Court Journal*. She was dressed in a very becoming deshabelle, and seen in that subdued light, with her back to the window, looked almost young. However, there was no one to behold her, except Annette, her lady's-maid, who was taking away the breakfast-things. The invalid lady's breakfast consisted of a cup of chocolate and a little dry toast; and she desired Annette, as the latter left the room, to request Mrs. Sutton to come to her im-

mediately. For a wonder, she had not seen the house-keeper during the whole of the previous day, but she knew how she had been occupied, and therefore excused her. Annette, of course, delivered the message; but Mrs. Sutton was busy at the moment, and nearly an hour elapsed before she complied with it.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Radcliffe had become impatient, and was just about to ring the bell, and inquire what was the matter, when the housekeeper entered the room, looking graver than usual.

"I ought to scold you, dear Sutton, for neglecting me so shamefully," said Mrs. Radcliffe; "but you look so ill that I cannot find in my heart to do so. I hear you have been sitting up for two nights with this poor young man. You really ought to consider yourself, and should have let one of the men servants sit up with him. How is he going on?" she added, with affected interest.

"He is so much better this morning, that he is able to get up. The fever is quite gone, and Mr. Malham, who has just been to see him, says he will be able to leave his room to-morrow."

"That's very satisfactory. I was afraid it might be a tedious business. What a singular occurrence! I never was more surprised than when I learnt that Mr. Radcliffe had brought a wounded young man home with him. He was influenced by the kindest motives, no doubt; but——"

"Mr. Radcliffe acted for the best," interrupted Mrs. Sutton. "I am very glad Mr. St. Ives was brought

here. And I am sure you will be of the same opinion."

"Well, perhaps I shall, especially if you are pleased, Sutton. You must have had a great deal of trouble with him. You look quite worn out."

"I am not in the least fatigued, and I should not have left him so long as the fever lasted."

"You are the best of nurses. I have reason to say so. You seem to take a special interest in Mr. St. Ives. I don't wonder at it. Oswald tells me he is a very fine young man."

"Mr. Oswald's description of him is perfectly correct. But it is not on account of his good looks that I am interested in him."

"Then you own the interest, and yet deny its cause," remarked Mrs. Radcliffe, smiling. "Had he been ill-looking you would have felt very differently towards him. What is he like?"

"I will show you who he is like," replied Mrs. Sutton, pointing to the miniature of Captain Delacombe.

"Like Seymour!" exclaimed Mrs. Radcliffe, so surprised that her listlessness of manner at once disappeared. "Like Seymour! impossible! You are trifling with me, Sutton."

"He is so like, that the miniature might be taken for him. Now you will understand why I take a particular interest in him."

"What is it you would insinuate, Sutton? Don't agitate me, I entreat of you. You know how unequal

I am to the slightest excitement, and such a thing as this might kill me. Give me a few drops."

The housekeeper obeyed the order, remarking as she did so,

"I would not have mentioned the matter, but I feel certain the likeness will be noticed, and I therefore judged it best to prepare you."

"Yes, I think Oswald must have noticed it, for he said yesterday that Mr. St. Ives resembled some one he had seen. He never saw Seymour, of course; but he has seen his portrait. What a commotion you have raised in my breast, Sutton! What a tumult of feelings you have roused!"

"I want you to be calm, for I have something to say to you."

"Something to say!" exclaimed Mrs. Radcliffe, alarmed by the housekeeper's manner. "What is it? Have you made a discovery in regard to this young man's parentage? Have you any reason to suspect—ha! Tell me! Don't keep me in this distracting state of suspense! Tell me all, there's a dear, good creature."

"I won't speak, unless you keep quiet. I don't think the likeness *can* be accidental."

"You believe, then, that he is Seymour's son?" cried Mrs. Radcliffe. "But no—no—no! the notion is too absurd to be indulged for a moment."

"Perhaps this signet-ring may afford some evidence," said Mrs. Sutton. "I took it from the dressing-table

in his room, and brought it to show you. Do you know Captain Delacombe's arms?"

"Yes; three tigers' heads, with a hand grasping a falchion for crest."

Mrs. Sutton gave her the ring, and begged her to examine it.

"Yes, here they are! here are the tigers' heads, with the crest! This is proof indeed. He *must* be Seymour's son. What age is the young man?"

"Between one and two-and-twenty, as near as I can guess."

"Then he must have been born before Seymour made love to me. He to whom I gave my heart was false and perjured!—oh!" And she sank back, exclaiming, "More drops, Sutton! more drops, or I shall expire!"

Suddenly she started up.

"A terrible thought suggests itself to me!" she exclaimed. "Was Seymour married at the time? Oh, if he was, he was forsworn indeed! Tell me what you think, Sutton."

"I have no thought upon the subject," rejoined the other, coldly.

"Do not spare my feelings. I can bear the truth. Do you think he *was* married?"

"Well, then, since I must give an opinion upon a point of which I can know nothing, I think he was married."

"Ah!" ejaculated the lady, with an hysterical cry. And she again sank back.

As soon as Mrs. Radcliffe's nervous attack, which was rather severe while it lasted, was over, she fixed her humid eyes on the housekeeper, who was standing beside her with a smelling-bottle in her hand, and said,

"I must see this young man, Sutton—this Hilary St. Ives, as he calls himself—I must satisfy myself that he is the person we suppose. You may be mistaken, for you have never seen his—I mean, the original of the miniature. But it is impossible *I* can be deceived. Seymour's image is graven on my heart."

Mrs. Sutton could scarcely hide her disgust.

"I do not think I am mistaken," she replied. "Still, as I am wholly unacquainted with Captain Delacombe, and can judge only of the likeness by the portrait, I may be wrong. On all accounts, I think it most desirable that you should see the young man; but you must consider well whether you are equal to the interview. It will not do to exhibit emotion before him, such as you have just displayed."

"I will not betray myself, depend upon it, Sutton. I can see him and converse with him, unmoved—even though he should prove——"

"Well, then, we will go to his room. But first allow me to put away that accusing portrait. Its disappearance may cause some remark, but better that, than it should be examined just now by the servants, or any one else."

So saying, without waiting for permission, she took

down the miniature and locked it up in the bureau, of which she possessed the key.

"You are sure you are quite equal to the effort?" she then added.

Mrs. Radcliffe replied that she was quite sure, and immediately arose with a very unwonted display of ardour. Her sensibilities were really aroused, and she was almost in a youthful flutter of anxiety.

Before leaving the boudoir with the housekeeper, she surveyed herself in the mirror, and slightly arranged her toilette and her hair.

IV.

The Interview.

It was a very unusual thing indeed for the invalid lady to leave her room at this hour, and Annette, who chanced to be on the landing wondered to see her issue forth.

"Mrs. Sutton wishes me to see Mr. St. Ives," remarked Mrs. Radcliffe, thinking it best to give an explanation.

"The poor young gentleman is in the dressing-room, me'm," replied Annette. "Boston has just left him."

"I will go on first, if you please," said Mrs. Sutton, stepping forward quickly towards the further end of the corridor, where the chamber they sought was situated.

Hilary had left his bed an hour ago. Boston, the valet, had brought him a change of linen, with several articles of apparel, furnished by good-natured Oswald Woodcot, and had assisted to dress him.

Mrs. Sutton's first business was to lay the signet-ring on the dressing-table. Hilary had not missed it.

The young man was reclining on a couch, wrapped in a dressing-gown. As may naturally be expected, he looked very pale, but this did not impair his good *looks*, but rather lent interest to his countenance.

Notwithstanding her boasted firmness, Mrs. Radcliffe well-nigh betrayed herself by a scream, and the housekeeper, perceiving her agitation, stepped between her and the young man to give her time to recover. Hilary had raised himself on her entrance, and when informed that the lady of the house had come to inquire after him, he expressed his sense of her kindness in suitable terms.

Not only was the face Seymour's, but the voice and manner were Seymour's. Mrs. Radcliffe thought she beheld her old lover again. No doubt it was a trying moment, and it is really wonderful that she maintained her self-possession at all.

But what shall we say of Mrs. Sutton? Could the mingled feelings with which she looked on be discerned in her countenance? Not in the least. To all outward appearance she was perfectly calm. Perhaps she was secretly well pleased by the effect produced upon her mistress by Hilary.

On his part, the young man was most favourably impressed by the lady, though quite unable to account for the interest she evidently took in him. He thought her very handsome, and singularly kind and agreeable in manner. She put several questions to him calculated to elicit information as to his history and position in life, but he was very guarded in his answers, and she could only ascertain that he had been brought up at Exeter, and had recently been in France, and that his nearest living relative—he did not say his father—was in India.

On all points he maintained great reserve.

He did not even explain the business that had brought him into this part of the country, though he lamented the loss of his papers.

At last, Mrs. Radcliffe mustered courage to put a question to him which she had all along been dying to ask.

He had said his nearest relative was in India. Was his mother still alive?

The question saddened him. She was dead.

Mrs. Radcliffe was sorry to have asked the question. But she ventured to inquire further if his mother had been dead long?

She died many years ago—during his infancy—he did not even remember her. He had never known a mother's care.

These words, which caused a sharp pang in Mrs. Sutton's breast, and made her put her hand to her heart, gave immense relief to Mrs. Radcliffe. Seymour was not the traitor she had deemed him. She glanced at the housekeeper, but was struck by her expression of pain, and inquired anxiously what was the matter. It was only a slight spasm.

"I am the cause of your illness, I fear," said Hilary. "You have been watching by me for two nights."

"No, it is not that. I am accustomed to nursing. But I have not been very well of late. It is gone." And then he forced a rather ghastly smile, adding, "I have

only performed the office which your mother would have discharged had she been living."

"No mother could have watched over a son more carefully than you have watched over me," said Hilary, with a deeply grateful look. "Nay, when my fever was at its height, I thought you were my mother come to life again, and standing beside me."

"You were delirious for a time," Mrs. Sutton hastened to remark, "and rambled strangely."

"Yes, I suppose I did. Without you I am certain my cure would not have been so soon accomplished. My strength has almost returned. To-morrow," he added to Mrs. Radcliffe, "I hope I shall be able to relieve you of any further trouble respecting me. I shall never forget the kindness I have experienced."

"You must not think of leaving us till you are perfectly recovered. Besides, to-morrow is my daughter May's birthday, and she has always a little fête on the occasion, at which I hope you may be well enough to assist."

"If Mr. St. Ives keeps perfectly quiet to-day, I have no doubt he will be able to come down-stairs to-morrow," observed Mrs. Sutton; "but he overrates his strength."

"You hear that," observed Mrs. Radcliffe. "You are not yet dismissed as cured."

"I am in too good quarters to feel any anxiety to leave them," rejoined Hilary. "I need scarcely say that it would delight me to be presented to Miss Radcliffe, but——"

"I will take no refusal. I shall be hurt if you leave to-morrow, and so will Mr. Radcliffe. You are his guest, you know. Unless you have some particular reason for early departure, stay with us a few days to recruit."

"The invitation is so kindly given, and is in itself so tempting, that I must accept it. I cannot offer the excuse of business. Since I have lost my papers, I have really nothing to do."

"It is too soon to despair of recovering them. They will turn up again, I have no doubt. And now you will understand that you are to make yourself quite at home. Mrs. Sutton will take every care of you."

"That I will," said the housekeeper, smiling.

The arrangement was precisely what she desired.

"I feel as if I were in a dream—and a very pleasant dream it is!" cried Hilary. "All sorts of strange fancies possess me," he added, gazing alternately at Mrs. Radcliffe and the housekeeper.

"Your brain is still a little heated, I perceive," said the lady.

"Yes," observed Mrs. Sutton, signifying by a glance that they had better withdraw.

Mrs. Radcliffe, therefore, rose to depart, but before she left the room, she said,

"I hope you will be able to join the breakfast-party to-morrow, Mr. St. Ives. I will tell May that she may expect to see you."

"I will come, if my kind nurse will allow me," he *replied*.

"What do you think of him?" inquired Mrs. Sutton, as they returned to the boudoir.

"He is the very image of Seymour. I did not venture to question him about his father; but I am sure he is Seymour's son. I think I did right to ask him to stay. The impulse was irresistible."

"You couldn't have done otherwise."

"I am glad you think so. Do you know, Sutton, I almost felt towards him as if he were my own son."

"The feeling was not unnatural. I am sure he is means of the interest you take in him."

"He seemed so. I shall never be able to part with him."

Mrs. Sutton smiled. The right effect had been produced.

"Perhaps he has been neglected by his father from some cause," she remarked, "and you may be the means of setting him right. Who knows?"

"His coming here looks like fatality," said Mrs. Radcliffe, who had become unusually pensive. "We shall learn more of his history in time, and then I will consider how to act. Try to find out if he wants anything, Sutton. I am afraid he is poor."

"I am afraid so. But unless I am mistaken in him, he is too proud to accept assistance."

"Still, we may help him. Something may be done. I tell you I feel like a mother towards him."

"That is clear; and he could not scruple to receive a mother's aid. But it would be difficult to make this

intelligible to him. However, I will do my best to carry out your wishes. I suppose you will breakfast with the party to-morrow?"

"I shall make an effort to do so—on his account."

"You promised to have a little conversation with Mr. Radcliffe about Mr. Oswald's suit."

"I did. But I think I shall defer it. There is no hurry. Mr. Radcliffe does not like the subject, as you are aware."

"I promised Mr. Oswald to remind you."

"I did not require to be reminded. But I shall have too much to do to-morrow to attend to the matter. To be plain, I want to ascertain what May thinks of young St. Ives before I stir further in Oswald's favour. Perhaps, she may like him."

Mrs. Sutton secretly exulted, but was careful to hide her exultation.

"I do not think May cares much for her cousin," she remarked.

"You appeared to think otherwise a few days ago. Have you altered your opinion?"

"I am still as favourable as ever to Mr. Oswald's suit. But I repeat I do not think May cares much about him."

"I am glad to learn that her heart is disengaged. That leaves me free to act. When you go down-stairs send her to me."

"Pray be careful what you say to her, or you may *do mischief*."

"Don't fear me. I shall talk to her chiefly about young St. Ives. She is curious about him. She saw him when he was brought into the house, and was interested by his appearance."

Shortly afterwards Mrs. Sutton quitted her mistress, and sent May to her, as desired.

V.

May and her Mother.

A SWEET musical voice in the passage. The door opened, and May entered the boudoir, bearing a little basket of flowers. Flora herself could not have looked more fresh and blooming.

She had just been summoned from the garden by Mrs. Sutton, and had not taken off the dainty little straw hat with which her blonde tresses were crowned. What a winsome smile upon her rosy lips. And what pearls those lips revealed.

Mrs. Radcliffe regarded her with pride, not unmingled with a slight feeling of envy. Her own faded charms suffered sadly by contrast with those of her lovely daughter.

"Good morrow, dearest mamma," cried May, kissing her affectionately. "I hope you are quite well this morning. You look so. I have brought you a few flowers. Oh, it is such an enchanting day. There has been a slight shower—the last shower of April—and now the sun is shining so brightly, and the birds are singing so blithely, and everything is looking so deliciously spring-like. Do let me persuade you to take a turn in the garden. You will enjoy it so much, and I am sure it will do you good. Shut up in this *close room* you can have no idea of the beauty and fresh-

ness of the morning. Oh! how I long to open the window."

"On no account," said Mrs. Radcliffe, checking her. "The air is far too chilly for me. At your age I delighted in a walk on a fine spring day like this, but now I am a poor invalid, and must be content with my boudoir. Thank you for these flowers, my love. They are very beautiful, but the odour of these jonquils is too strong to be agreeable. Put the basket aside, please. Now, come and sit near me, and let us talk."

May obeyed, drew a chair towards her mother, and fixed her large blue eyes inquiringly upon her.

"To-morrow is the first of May," said Mrs. Radcliffe, taking her hand. "To-morrow you will be nineteen, the brightest and happiest season in a woman's existence—at least, it is generally so considered, though in my own instance it proved otherwise. At nineteen I was far from happy." She sighed, and then added, "But I am sure *you* are happy, darling."

"Indeed I am, dearest mamma—truly happy. I have not a wish ungratified."

"Not one?" asked her mother. "Take care, I am about to catechise you. But before I begin I will make a little confession which may encourage you to deal frankly with me. It may make you smile, but I shall not smile at any avowal it may elicit from you. Don't interrupt me. At nineteen—I may say it now, since I am an old woman—I was very much admired, and I am afraid you will *think* I must have been excessively

silly when I own that I was pleased with the admiration I excited. I was thought a great flirt. I see you are beginning to laugh already, and you have a perfect right to do so, for you are entirely free from the faults which I have just admitted."

"Dear mamma, I am not laughing," remarked May, trying to look grave.

"Listen to me," resumed Mrs. Radcliffe. "Amongst my host of admirers there was only one who really interested me, and before I was aware of it he had contrived to win my heart. Your grandpapa, who was resolved that I should never, with his consent, marry any other than a man of fortune, forbade me to think of the person on whom I had foolishly fixed my affections. Ah! what a struggle it cost me to obey. Recollect that this was at nineteen—your own age, darling. I had no tender mother into whose pitying breast I could pour my grief. Sympathy from my father I had none."

Here she paused for a few moments, overpowered by her recollections.

"Of course," she continued, "all has turned out for the best. I was very silly then. Your grandpapa—stern as I deemed him—was quite right, and I was quite wrong. But I did not think so at the time—and I was wretched. Now, my dear child," she added, looking into her daughter's face, "you will not, after this confession, withhold your confidence from me. You are not circumstanced as I was, darling. Your papa will never oppose your inclinations—nor will I.

We both love you tenderly. You are not a flirt—but a pretty girl, with a good fortune, *must* have admirers. I had no fortune. If you have a preference for any of your *pretendants*—as I fancy you have—do not hesitate to avow it.”

“Really, dear mamma,” replied May, who had listened with some surprise to this address, “I scarcely know how to answer you. It would be ridiculous in me to pretend I am not aware that some young men who come here do pay me attention. But I have never thought seriously about any of them.”

“But there is a young man who is *in* the house—what of him?”

“Make yourself quite easy, dear mamma. I have not lost my heart to cousin Oswald.”

“Cousin Oswald—or I am very much mistaken—thinks otherwise.”

“So he may—so, perhaps, he does—but he is a silly fellow so to delude himself. I like Oswald. He has excellent qualities, and a disposition that might attach any one to him. I know he is devoted to me; but for all that I cannot love him—except as a cousin. There, mamma, do you now understand?”

“Perfectly, my love,” replied Mrs. Radcliffe, dissembling her satisfaction. “I am rather sorry for poor Oswald.”

“Yes, I am sometimes sorry for him myself. But what am I to do? How am I to cure him without giving him pain? Whenever I am about to speak seriously to him, he looks at me so imploringly that I cannot find

in my heart to crush his hopes altogether. So we go on. He follows me about like papa's great water-spaniel, Neptune, and I treat him much as I treat Neptune. I believe if I were to throw a stick into the lake, and bid Oswald fetch it, he would plunge in at once as readily as Neptune."

And she laughed heartily at the notion.

Mrs. Radcliffe smiled secretly, but remarked, "I am shocked to hear you compare your good-natured and devoted cousin to a water-spaniel."

"I am a friend to dogs, for they are honest creatures, as Pierre says in the play, mamma. Oswald is as honest and good a creature as ever lived, and has the fidelity and attachment of a dog, so I think the comparison is not so very inappropriate. Have you finished your catechism?"

"Quite; I find I shall have nothing to say to your papa on your birthday."

"Papa won't be sorry for that, I think," remarked the young lady, archly.

"Well, let us change the topic, my love. I have just been to see poor Mr. St. Ives. Thanks to Mrs. Sutton's care, he has almost recovered from the injuries he received from the robbers. All the circumstances attending his arrival here are so singular that my curiosity has been greatly excited about him."

"So has mine, mamma. Tell me what he is like, in the first place?"

"You saw him when he was brought into the house, and can judge of his appearance."

"True; but he looked so dreadfully pale then. I thought him dying. He appeared to be very handsome."

"He has quite what the French call '*l'air d'un grand seigneur*.' I was very much struck, I assure you, and from the first moment felt an interest in him, for which I find it difficult to account. This sort of thing is very unusual with me, for I rarely take an interest in a perfect stranger. But Mr. St. Ives is not an ordinary person."

"He seems a very mysterious person, mamma. Papa and Oswald can tell me nothing about him. Have you learnt any particulars?"

"The principal features of his history, so far as I can ascertain them, are these: He has been brought up at Exeter, and has recently been in France, where I fancy he has relatives. He lost his mother in infancy; and his father, I believe—for this is mere surmise on my part—is in India."

"How came he to be crossing Wootton Heath on the night when he was robbed?"

"He seems to have been on his way to town, and had with him, in his knapsack, some important documents, of which, unluckily, he has been deprived by the robbers."

"So I heard," cried May. "I want to know what those documents relate to."

"Then you must suspend your curiosity till to-morrow, when you will probably see him, and can question him, if you think proper. If he is able to do

so, he will come down to breakfast in the morning. I took care to tell him that it is an interesting anniversary."

"The anniversary can have no interest to him," observed May.

"Pardon me, my love; he was much flattered by being allowed to join the family party on such an occasion."

At this moment the door was partially opened, and a good-humoured, good-looking face was seen at it.

The face was Oswald's. He asked if he might come in.

VI.

Oswald.

RECEIVING permission, he shut the door and advanced, but his aunt motioned him to keep off.

"You have been smoking, Oswald. Give him some eau-de-Cologne, May."

Instantly retiring, Oswald took a seat on a causeuse on the opposite side of the fireplace.

Undoubtedly, he was a very handsome young fellow, tall, well built, and well set on his lower limbs, which, as he wore knickerbockers, could be seen to be remarkably well turned. He had an open countenance, brown curling locks, whiskers a few shades lighter than his hair, and brushed back according to the prevailing mode, regular features, light grey eyes, and a fresh complexion, denoting the most perfect health. Not, perhaps, a very intellectual face, but a very pleasant one, nevertheless. Considering his personal advantages and his devotion, it is rather surprising that May should care so little about him.

"What has brought you here, Oswald?" inquired his aunt.

"I have a piece of news for you," he replied. "I have just got a letter from my mother. Who do you think is coming here to-morrow?"

"Your mother!" cried Mrs. Radcliffe.

"I hope so," added May. "I shall be delighted to see her."

"No," rejoined Oswald, laughing. "Your grandpapa is coming. Perhaps you won't be quite so delighted to see *him*."

Exclamations of surprise were uttered both by mamma and daughter.

Oswald easily perceived, from the expression of his aunt's face, that the intelligence was not altogether agreeable to her. At any other time she would have been glad to see her father; but at this particular juncture, when Hilary St. Ives was in the house, and when she had a little project on foot in regard to him, the shrewd and suspicious old gentleman was very likely to be in the way, and might interfere with her plan. Besides, *he* had known Seymour Delacombe intimately in days gone by, and would naturally be struck by the likeness borne to him by Hilary. These reflections passed rapidly through her mind, and gave to her countenance the expression noticed by Oswald.

"I wonder your grandpapa has not written to me to announce his intention," she observed, in a tone that showed she was a little put out.

"He felt sure he would be welcome, as he will be, mamma," said May. "It is long since dear grandpapa has paid us a visit. I am glad he is coming at last."

"Yes; I only wish he had deferred his visit for a week," objected her mother. "Poor Mr. St. Ives has

got his room, and, as you know, your grandpapa is very particular, and won't be satisfied with any other room than the one he is accustomed to."

"Why shouldn't he have it?" cried Oswald. "St. Ives must turn out. Luckily he's well enough, or will be well enough to-morrow to take his departure."

"I've asked him to stay here for a week to recruit," said Mrs. Radcliffe, in a tone of rebuke. "Sutton will find him another room."

"Very kind of you indeed, aunt," said Oswald, a little abashed, and secretly wishing that the young man had never got into the house at all.

"Have the robbers been caught, Oswald? Has Mr. St. Ives's knapsack been recovered?" inquired May.

"No. Wormald, the police-officer, has just been here. Still at fault, though he is not without hopes of capturing the gipsies; for he thinks they are concealed in the neighbourhood. Poor St. Ives, I fear, has said good-bye to his precious documents."

"Apparently, they are a great loss to him," observed May, in a sympathising tone.

"If he wants them back he ought to offer a jolly good reward for them," cried Oswald. "But I say, aunt, what has become of the miniature that used to hang up there? I mean the portrait of——"

Seeing from his aunt's looks that he had asked the wrong question, he stopped short, though he had some observations to make.

"You have no business to be so inquisitive, sir,"

said Mrs. Radcliffe, in a tone calculated to check further remarks on the subject, and it had the effect desired.

"Aunt Bell, I trust, gives a good account of herself?" interposed May, coming to the rescue.

"You shall see her letter," he replied, giving it to her.

"What a very long letter! Must I read it aloud?" she inquired.

"By all means," he replied, with affected nonchalance. "There are no secrets in it. It relates chiefly to yourself. I ought, perhaps, to have kept it back till to-morrow—but no matter."

May then read as follows:

"Your time seems to have been so fully and agreeably occupied, you dear, undutiful boy, that you appear not to have had a moment to spare for your poor mother, who has been anxiously expecting a letter from you for the last fortnight, and has been doomed to constant disappointment. After so prolonged a silence you ought to have something pleasant to communicate.

"Your last letter, now nearly three weeks old—think of that, sir!—was full of rapturous descriptions of May—as if I didn't know how lovely and amiable she is—and the impression it conveyed, whether designed or not on your part, is that you have fallen *in love with your charming cousin.*"

"I think I had better not read any more," said May, stopping.

"Oh yes, pray go on," Oswald entreated.

"I shall not be surprised if it turns out to be so, for it is scarcely possible to be constantly in the society of so adorable a creature as May without becoming passionately enamoured of her. Such, at least, is my notion. And I remember the time when your aunt, who was quite as pretty as May now is, could not avoid making conquests of all who came near her."

"What do you think of that, mamma?" asked May, pausing. "I hope you are flattered."

Gross as it was, the flattery was not a whit too strong for Mrs. Radcliffe. But she said,

"I wonder your Aunt Bell could write so silly a letter. But let us hear it out."

"I think I have divined your secret, my dear boy, but you do not throw any light on a point that is naturally of the utmost interest to me. You tell me you are May's constant companion, in her walks, in her rides, in her drives. You say she sings and plays so divinely, that you could listen to her for ever. You say you act as her head-gardener, and would act as her groom if she would let you; and you mention several other particulars that prove how devoted you are to her; but you do *not* tell me the one thing I most desire to know. You do not even hint that your charming cousin, with whom you are evidently smitten, manifests the slightest predilection for you."

Here Oswald coughed slightly. May, however,

would not raise her eyes from the letter to look at him, but went on.

"A mother's vanity may mislead me, but I cannot think, from the opportunities she has of knowing them, that May can be insensible to your many good qualities; or, shall I say it?—indifferent to your personal advantages. I fondly persuade myself that the attachment must be mutual. You have a noble and true heart, my dear boy, if you have not the cleverest head in the world. In some respects, and these not the least important to her happiness, May will not find your superior. That I can affirm. I have long entertained the idea that you are formed for each other. Heaven grant you may be united!"

"Amen!" ejaculated Oswald, fervently.

"Is there much more?" inquired Mrs. Radcliffe.

"Yes, a good deal, mamma."

"Pray stop, if you have had enough," said Oswald.

But May went on.

"As I cannot divest myself of the impression, that you and your fair cousin will make a match of it (or, as your Aunt Radcliffe used to say, when a girl, 'put up your horses in the same stable'), I have written to your grandpapa to press him to make a settlement upon you. He is very rich, and lives so inexpensively, that a few thousands can be no object whatever to him. You are certain to be his heir; but he is hale and hearty, and has such a capital constitution, *that he may*, and I sincerely hope, will, last for

several years. May is a great favourite with him, and since there is every prospect of your being united to her, I feel pretty sure he will place you in an independent position, and remove any obstacles that might otherwise arise on that score. As he is as punctual as the Duke of Wellington used to be, and sure to reply without delay, I won't send off this letter till I hear from him."

"Has she got his answer?" inquired Mrs. Radcliffe.

"Yes, dear aunt, yes," replied Oswald, eagerly. "Do finish the letter, May."

"I told you I should not be kept long in suspense. To my great surprise, and no less to my delight, your grandpapa has answered my letter in person, and is now with me at Dunham Lodge. He is in very good humour, and apparently much pleased with the idea of the match. He won't make any positive promise, but I think he will do what we desire. That he means to do something is certain, for he has determined to start for Hazlemere House at once, and ascertain by personal inspection, as he says, 'how the land lies.'

"To-morrow he will be in town, and stay at the Langham Hotel, and on the following morning, 1st of May, will run down to Hazlemere. He is an odd man, as your aunt knows full well, and his design is to take her by surprise; but I think she ought to be prepared for his visit.

"It now only remains for me, in concluding this long letter, to wish *dearest May* many, many happy

returns of her birthday. May the day prove auspicious; and a long and blissful term, in which she and you will be principally concerned, date from it. How proud and happy your mother will be, if her fond anticipations are realised."

"That is all," observed May, putting down the letter.

"And enough too," said her mother.

Small need, we think, to state that Mrs. Woodcot's letter was meant to be shown to Mrs. Radcliffe and May, but that clever lady never supposed her son would allow it to be read under such absurd circumstances as those recorded. The comical intonation given by May to certain passages, on which he had most relied, entirely destroyed their effect, and before the letter was ended, he perceived the mistake he had made, and became very hot and confused. Not knowing what to say, he cast one of those imploring looks, to which she was accustomed, at his fair cousin; but she was not to be moved now.

At last he stammered out, "I should never have ventured upon a declaration, if I had not been prompted by that unlucky letter. But do let me learn my fate."

"Your fate is not in my hands," replied May. "I have no other answer to give to such a question. What can you have been saying about me to Aunt Bell to cause her to write to grandpapa as she has done? You have placed me in a very ridiculous position."

"*I will ask pardon on my bended knees, if that*

will soften you," he cried, about to suit the action to the word.

"Remain where you are, sir. I cannot treat this as a jest. Grandpapa is coming. How is he to be undeceived?"

"I don't know," rejoined Oswald, driven to his wits' end. "But, upon my honour, I had no idea my mother would write to him, still less that the old gentleman would come here to perplex us."

"No, you could not possibly foresee that, Oswald," observed his aunt. "Your mother should not have been so precipitate. But I understand her feelings, and can excuse her. You must make allowances for Oswald, May. It was natural that he should delude himself."

"Thank you, aunt, thank you," he cried, gratefully. "I certainly believed—that is, I fancied May was not quite indifferent to me."

"Perhaps I have been to blame," said May, relenting. "You are not the only person who has been deceived by my manner," she added, glancing archly at her mother. "So take my forgiveness."

And she extended her hand towards him, which he pressed eagerly to his lips.

"I suspect she loves him, in spite of her denial," thought Mrs. Radcliffe.

"I hope grandpapa's errand won't be altogether fruitless," said May. "Mamma, you must try and persuade him to do something for poor Oswald."

"Nay, my love, it rests with you, and not with me.

On one condition, no doubt your grandpapa will do something."

"But that condition I cannot agree to," she rejoined.

"Ah!" exclaimed Oswald, despairingly. "Don't trouble yourselves about me," he added, with a broken-hearted expression. "I care for nothing now. I shall go abroad. I don't know what I shall do. But I shall not remain longer here."


"Not if I beg you to stay?" said May, in a coaxing tone that was quite irresistible.

"I will do whatever you bid me," he replied, with the submission of a slave.

"Then I order you to remain over my birthday," she said. "You shall go when you please afterwards."

Just then an interruption was offered by the entrance of Mr. Radcliffe, who came in quest of Oswald.

"I thought I should find you here," he said, clapping his nephew on the shoulder as he advanced to greet his wife, whom he had not seen before on that morning.



VII.

Mr. Radcliffe.

MR. RADCLIFFE was turned sixty, rather above the middle size, and had the portly figure and large features which *Punch* is wont to assign to John Bull. He looked the picture of good health, and, though stout, he was active, and took a great deal of exercise, living as much as he could in the open air. He wore rather large whiskers, which, with his snow-white locks, contrasted forcibly with his rosy complexion. He did not wear the traditional John Bull top-boots, but his sturdy legs were clothed in a pair of Mr. Bowley's incomparable cool gaiters. He had a loose blue coat with brass buttons, and a baggy waistcoat. Mr. Radcliffe's manner towards his wife was singularly deferential, and it was evident she had lost none of her influence over him. Years had in no degree diminished his admiration of her beauty.

Mrs. Radcliffe thought it best to let him know immediately that her father was coming on the following day, and though much surprised, he was greatly pleased by the intelligence. The difficulty in regard to the room in which Hilary St. Ives was lodged at once occurred to him, as it had done to his wife. But this was soon got over.

All being settled, Mr. Radcliffe chuckled, and rubbed

his hands with satisfaction at the thought of seeing his father-in-law, whom he liked very much.

"I must get out some of my '20 port for him," he cried, smacking his lips. "He will want a glass of it to drink your health, May, and so shall I—ha! ha!" And he laughed his resonant laugh. "Oswald must drink it in claret, since he can't stand port. By-the-by, I had forgotten what I came about," addressing his nephew. "Mrs. Sutton wants to go to Guildford on some business of her own. You must drive her in the dog-cart to the Gomshall station. I can't very well spare the time myself. Besides, I expect some people to call upon me."

"I shall like it of all things," replied Oswald. "But I suppose I shan't have to wait at the station till she comes back from Guildford."

"No—no—she won't return till late. A fly will bring her home."

"This must be a sudden idea," exclaimed Mrs. Radcliffe, surprised. "Sutton was with me just now, and said nothing about going to Guildford. What is to happen to poor Mr. St. Ives?"

"Oh! he'll take no harm," replied her husband. "Boston will look after him. He has got the *Times*, and a book to amuse him—and can have a cigar if he likes. No, I beg pardon, my love. I know you don't allow smoking in the bedrooms."

"I wish I could prevent it everywhere else in the house. But I want to know why Sutton is going to *Guildford*."

"She wants to go to the bank, I believe, my dear. You had better not keep her waiting, Oswald. The dog-cart has been ordered a quarter of an hour ago."

"Oh! I didn't understand that," cried the young man. And with an expressive look at May, he quitted the room.

Mrs. Radcliffe was puzzled, but she fancied this sudden expedition to Guildford had some relation to Hilary St. Ives. What surprised her most was, that Mrs. Sutton had not consulted her before taking the step. However, she could not ask further questions, without appearing too curious.

"I fancy Sutton has saved money," observed Mr. Radcliffe.

"I dare say she has," she replied.

This was a very evasive, and by no means truthful, response. She knew perfectly well that the house-keeper *had* saved what Oswald would have called "a pot of money."

"Well, May," said her father, looking at her, "now that Oswald is gone, I have something to tell you."

"What is it, dear papa?" she inquired. "Why should it be a secret from Oswald?"

"I scarcely know why," he replied, smiling. "But you shall judge whether I have acted discreetly, or not. I have just received a proposal of marriage for you. Now, was I right in reserving this communication for your own ear, and for that of your mamma?"

"You were quite right, papa," she replied.

"Does the offer meet your approval, my dear?"

inquired Mrs. Radcliffe, not feeling at all certain from her husband's manner that it did so.

"I can raise no objection to it. On the contrary, I am bound to say that, viewed in a certain light, the offer is highly advantageous. Not to keep you a moment longer in suspense," he added to May, "it is Sir Charles Ilminster of Boxgrove Park, who, through me, offers you his hand."

May did not make a remark, but, from having blushed deeply, she became quite pale.

"I shall not attempt to influence you one way or the other, my love," said her father, kindly. "You must consider well before you decide."

"You are the kindest papa in the world," she cried, flinging her arms round his neck.

Mrs. Radcliffe thought it behoved her to say a few words.

"Most girls would think that an offer from a handsome young baronet, with a fine place, did not require much consideration" she observed.

"Sir Charles Ilminster is thirty-five, mamma."

"I like that. Thirty-five is young for a baronet. Sir Charles is in the prime of life. He belongs to an old family—one of the oldest in the county. His estates are unencumbered, I believe. To add to his numerous recommendations, he stands quite alone. There is no Dowager Lady Ilminster. He has only a sister, Lady Richborough, a widow, and a most charming person."

"I quite agree with you, mamma, Lady Richborough is charming."

"Is not Sir Charles charming?"

"Agreeable, gentleman-like, good-looking—yes. Charming—no."

"Boxgrove, I repeat, is an exceedingly fine place."

"Granted. But I like Hazlemere quite as well."

"Absurd. The two places cannot be compared. Boxgrove is an ancient mansion, with a noble park. Our's is—but I won't depreciate it. You are sadly wanting in taste, my love, and I fear in discrimination. The main point is, whether you at all like Sir Charles."

"I neither like him, nor dislike him, mamma. I am simply indifferent about him."

"You will have to make up your mind by to-morrow, my dear," said her father. "He is coming over with Lady Richborough and will expect an answer."

"I will give Lady Richborough my answer," said May.

"Incomprehensible girl!" cried her mother.

"Well, do as you please," observed Mr. Radcliffe. "I've said I won't influence you, and I'll keep my word. But I am bound to confirm all your mamma has said about Sir Charles Ilminster. A wrong conclusion might be drawn from my silence. And now, my dear," he added to his wife, "you must excuse me. I can't stand the heat of this room any longer. It feels like a furnace."

"I feel it very warm, too, papa," cried May. "I must have a turn in the garden."

And they quitted the room together.

"We shall see what effect Hilary will produce," mused Mrs. Radcliffe, as she was left alone. "He is far handsomer than Sir Charles, and much younger. But then he has nothing. I wonder why Sutton has gone to Guildford."

May and her father reached the garden just in time to see the dog-cart, with Mrs. Sutton and Oswald inside it, dash through the lodge-gates. The young man waved his hand to them.

Another person, stationed at the window of an upper chamber, watched them as they moved slowly across the lawn.

This person was ravished by May's beauty. Never had he beheld a countenance so enchanting, nor a figure so light and graceful. His heart was lost to her at once.

VIII.

Sir Charles Ilminster and Lady Richborough.

THE dog-cart was on its way to the station.

Those within it ought to have been enlivened by the rare beauty of the morning, and by the smiling aspect of nature; but they were not. The conversation, commenced by Oswald, soon dropped. Mrs. Sutton was evidently preoccupied, and would not give heed to his talk.

They had crossed a breezy common—not the heath upon which Hilary had been lost, but an equally picturesque tract—and soon afterwards entered a long defile, if it may be properly so termed, which led them between the North Downs.

Nothing could exceed the beauty of the pass. A small river took its course through the narrow valley, and the road skirting its banks offered charming points of view. In many cases the sides of the downs were clothed with timber, while the mansions to which those woods belonged could be descried through openings amid the trees.

One of the most extensive and most beautiful of the parks in question belonged to Sir Charles Ilminster, of whom mention has just been made. Sir Charles's noble ancestral mansion occupied a commanding situa-

tion, and overlooked the whole of the lovely surrounding district.

Drawn by Spanker, the dog-cart was going at a rattling pace past the tall grey palings that served to keep the deer within Boxgrove Park, when a turn in the road showed Oswald a lady and gentleman on horseback, followed by a groom, about a quarter of a mile ahead.

In these persons he had no difficulty in recognising the owner of the adjoining property, and his sister, Lady Richborough.

As Sir Charles and the lady with him were proceeding very leisurely, the intervening distance was soon cleared by Spanker. The groom touched his hat as the dog-cart passed him, and his master and Lady Richborough, hearing the sound of wheels, turned to see who was coming on.

Both were extremely well mounted. Sir Charles had a decidedly military look and bearing—not surprising, since he had been in the —th Lancers, and had served with distinction. He had a tall, symmetrical figure; handsome, but rather pronounced features; and wore thick moustaches and a long imperial.

High-bred, high-minded, high-spirited, chivalrous, Sir Charles was the soul of honour, and had a spice of romance in his composition.

Ten years younger than her brother, Lady Richborough was in the full éclat of her resplendent beauty. Magnificent black hair, eyes of almost Oriental size and splendour, veiled by long dark eyelashes, classically cut

features, a full mouth, and rounded chin, these constituted some of her charms. To her personal attractions she added most fascinating manners, and a remarkable power of pleasing when she cared to exert it. A perfect Amazon, she never looked better than on horseback. She sat her steed well, and her riding-habit brought out the best points of her superb figure.

The widow of Sir Algernon Richborough, a Yorkshire baronet, who unfortunately had a son by a former marriage, besides other children, her charming ladyship had a tolerably good jointure. But, alas! a very harsh restriction was attached to it.

Sir Algernon was of a jealous nature, and had not sufficient confidence in his lovely wife. Not believing she would be faithful to his memory, he decreed that her jointure should depart from her if she married again. But for this proceeding, which we cannot too strongly condemn, it is certain Lady Richborough would not have remained two years a widow.

How dreadfully mercenary are the young men of the day! A thousand charms, without money, will not fix them. The report that Lady Richborough would lose her jointure on marriage scared all her young admirers. Some more mature pretendants, with better taste and larger means, would not have minded the loss. But they did not suit Lady Richborough, who was determined upon having a young partner in her second *noces*.

It remains only to state that the lovely widow had a house in Eaton-place. But she only occupied it

during the season, and generally took care of her brother at Boxgrove.

Only of late, Sir Charles Ilminster had become intimate with the Radcliffes, and the intimacy was brought about by the great fancy taken for May by Lady Richborough.

Sir Charles, who was said to have had an early disappointment, from which he had never entirely recovered, and which had hitherto prevented him from marrying, was not proof against the charms of the youthful beauty. May's freshness and vivacity enchanted him, and though the connexion was not exactly one he would have sought if his feelings had not been strongly engaged, he began seriously to entertain the idea of making her his wife.

Before taking the decisive step, however, he consulted his sister. She had already perceived the effect produced upon him, and in reality had helped to fan the flame by her praises of the object of his regards; and, as may be supposed, he met with no opposition from her. On the contrary, she applauded his choice, and counselled him not to lose time, but secure the prize, lest it should slip through his fingers.

This argument, of which he recognised the full force, prevailed, and induced him to make the formal proposal just reported to the reader. The groom having delivered the letter containing the proposal, had rejoined his master, who had ridden on to Wootton, and Sir Charles was returning to Boxgrove, when *overtaken by Oswald.*

On reaching Sir Charles and his sister, who had reined in their horses, Oswald pulled up, and greetings were exchanged.

After favouring the young man with one of her most bewitching smiles, and allowing him to touch the tips of her gloved fingers, her ladyship addressed herself to Mrs. Sutton, of whose influence with all parties at Hazlemere she was quite cognisant, and bringing her horse as close as she could to the housekeeper, began to chat with her in the most affable and friendly manner, making all sorts of affectionate inquiries respecting May and Mrs. Radcliffe.

Mrs. Sutton knew that Sir Charles's groom had brought a letter that morning from his master to Mr. Radcliffe, and her ladyship's attentions, coupled with the haughty baronet's altered manner, led her to suspect the truth.

While Lady Richborough was thus employed, Sir Charles took Oswald in hand, and ascertained, much to his relief, that he was merely conveying Mrs. Sutton to the Gomshall station. We say to Sir Charles's relief, for, with all a lover's doubts and trepidation, he had at first imagined that the young man and his companion were on the way to Boxgrove, charged with some sort of reply to his proposal. A little reflection would have shown him the absurdity of the supposition, but time for reflection had not been allowed him.

With unwonted courtesy, he then pressed Oswald to take luncheon with him on his way back, and the young man readily accepted the invitation. Like all

who came near her, Oswald was charmed with Lady Richborough, and was delighted at the prospect of passing an hour in her society.

Hilary St. Ives formed the next topic of discourse, in which everybody took part. Of course, her ladyship had heard of the strange circumstances of the case—how the young man had been robbed and half murdered on Wootton Heath, and brought to Hazlemere. How was he going on? Was he still alive?

Mrs. Sutton was able to assure her that Mr. St. Ives was not only alive, but going on so well, that he would most probably come down-stairs on the morrow.

Lady Richborough was astonished. Never was anything so wonderful. He owed his life to Mrs. Sutton. But they all knew what an excellent nurse she was.

Mrs. Sutton acknowledged the compliment, and said she should not have left her patient if there had been the least danger in doing so.

Her ladyship next inquired if it was true that Mr. St. Ives was very handsome. Whereupon, Oswald immediately called out that he was the handsomest fellow he had ever seen.

On this, Sir Charles pricked up his ears, and wanted to know all about him, but no satisfactory answer could be given to his inquiries.

"Well, we are coming over to Hazlemere to-morrow, and then we shall probably see him, and learn something more," observed her ladyship. "A pleasant journey to you, dear Mrs. Sutton."

"*Dear Mrs. Sutton,*" thought the housekeeper, as she bowed adieu. "I see how it is, clearly enough. But they are mistaken, if they calculate on me."

"We shall see you at luncheon, Mr. Woodcot," said Sir Charles, waving his hand to Oswald.

The young man nodded, raised his hat to Lady Richborough, and just touching Spanker with the whip, quickly disappeared.

"You will laugh at what I am going to say, Myrtilla," observed Sir Charles to his sister, as they rode towards the handsome park lodge; "but I have an unaccountable feeling that the arrival at Hazlemere of this mysterious St. Ives, at this particular juncture, bodes ill to me. I fear a rival in him—a successful rival."

"A rival!" exclaimed her ladyship, displaying her pearly teeth, as she laughed heartily. "I know you are excessively superstitious, Charley, but I didn't think you so bad as this. Dismiss such idle fears. Handsome as they say he is, St. Ives is not likely to cut *you* out. He has appeared on the scene in a very strange manner, I allow; but he will very soon make his exit. You have far more reason to fear rivalry from Oswald Woodcot. He is in love with his fair cousin, that's certain. But, as I have told you, I don't think he has made the slightest impression upon her heart. As to St. Ives, I will undertake that she shan't fall in love with *him*."

Meanwhile, the dog-cart pursued its way.

Having now recovered in some degree from his

depression, Oswald unbosomed himself to his companion, confessing that he had shown his mother's letter to Mrs. Radcliffe and May. Mrs. Sutton looked grave, and told him he had pursued an exceedingly injudicious course, and need not be surprised at the result, adding that it would be very difficult to repair the error he had committed. While blaming his imprudence, she promised him her best assistance to set matters right; and the promise raised the poor down-hearted fellow's hopes.

Mrs. Sutton was secretly much vexed on learning that old Mr. Thornton was coming to Hazlemere next day, as his visit threatened to embarrass her plans. But she took care not to let her annoyance appear.

They reached the station just ten minutes before the arrival of the Guildford train. Oswald would have waited to see Mrs. Sutton off, if she would have allowed him. She told him she should not return till late, as she had a good deal to do at Guildford. So he lighted a cigar, and drove off to Boxgrove, anticipating a pleasant luncheon.

When the train came up, Mrs. Sutton entered a first-class carriage.

IX.

Why Mrs. Sutton went to Guildford, and whom she met there.

A PLEASANT old town is Guildford—none pleasanter in England—and on that sunshiny spring day it wore an unusually cheerful aspect. The square tower of the ancient Norman castle, reared upon its lofty mound in the centre of the town, looked proudly, yet smilingly, on the many picturesque edifices, halls, churches, hospitals, and quaintly-gabled habitations clustered around it. Bright and beautiful looked the hills near the town—fairest of all being St. Catherine's Hill, which now looked so lovely and inviting that a devotee might have been tempted to climb to the desecrated chapel on its brow. Fair looked the woods, wherein lies buried antique and storied Losely—fair looked the groves around Compton—fair looked the valley, through which wanders the Wey.

As Mrs. Sutton passed rapidly through the lovely valley of the Wey, and approached the picturesque old town, she could not help casting a glance at the towering keep; but otherwise, we regret to say, she was insensible to the beauties of the scene. Her mind was fully occupied with the business she had to do.

Quitting the large and bustling station, at which two important lines unite, she took her way up the High-street. It was rather crowded at the time, and

many carriages passed her, but she looked at none of them. She bought her own dresses, and most of Mrs. Radcliffe's dresses, at Guildford; but she was not going to the draper's or the milliner's now. She had extensive dealings with several other tradespeople, but she did not enter a single shop. She went on till she came to the London and County Bank.

As she entered the bank, a very respectable middle-aged man, rather bald, and wearing spectacles, who was engaged with his books at a desk at the back, happened to turn his head, and catching sight of her, he immediately quitted his occupation, and saluted her deferentially.

"Good morning, Mrs. Sutton. Glad to see you, ma'am. What can I have the pleasure of doing for you?" he inquired, in bland tones.

"I want to draw out a little money, Mr. Price," she replied.

"How much will you take, ma'am?" said Mr. Price. "I will write out the draft for you, if you please."

"Thank you. Be good enough to write it for six hundred pounds."

Mr. Price looked a little surprised, but made no remark, and having written out the cheque, he passed it over the counter for her signature.

"How will you take the money, madam?" was the next inquiry.

"In five bank notes, each for one hundred. The

remaining hundred in smaller notes. Stay, I should like twenty pounds in gold."

"Very good."

And the bank notes and gold being at once produced and delivered to her, she proceeded to secure them in her portmonnaie and pocket-book—for she needed both.

While she was thus employed, Mr. Price told her he had been reading in the *Surrey Gazette* an account of the robbery of Mr. St. Ives on Wootton Heath, and he presumed the newspaper was correct in stating that the unfortunate young gentleman had been conveyed to Hazlemere, by Mr. Radcliffe. Being informed that the statement was exact in all its particulars, Mr. Price next expressed his surprise at the great remissness of the police. What were they about? The robbers ought long since to have been captured. In this Mrs. Sutton entirely concurred. But Mr. Price did not stop here. He next ventured to observe—and he made the remark with a peculiarly soft smile—that he thought he knew how Mrs. Sutton intended to invest her money. Mr. Malham had been at the bank the other day, and mentioned casually that a very desirable house was to be sold at Wootton for six hundred pounds—a great bargain—cheap as dirt. Mr. Price hoped she was going to buy that house. Mrs. Sutton's smile might have signified either "yes" or "no," at the option of the observer; but she made no direct response, and bowing to Mr. Price, prepared to depart.

Just as she was going two persons entered the

bank. Unmistakably military men, and probably from Aldershot camp, which, as the reader need scarcely be informed, is not very far from Guildford. The foremost of the two—a youngish man, under thirty, apparently—scarcely merits description. But his companion must not be thus passed over. He was a very distinguished-looking person indeed, fifteen years at least older than his friend, but still strikingly handsome. His aristocratic and refined demeanour did not savour of the camp, though his bronzed visage, marked, but not disfigured, by a large cicatrice, and grey moustache proclaimed that he had served long under an Indian or African sun. If he had so served, his health did not seem much impaired. His dark eye was still full of fire, and his tall thin figure perfectly erect. A dark-blue frock-coat was buttoned tightly across his chest.

Both officers removed their cigars from their lips as they entered the bank.

"Pray come in, colonel," cried Captain de Vesci, the younger of the two. "I won't keep you longer than is required to cash a cheque."

"I will wait for you as long as my cigar will keep alight," replied the colonel, laughing.

That voice!—that well-known voice! which she had not heard for many, many years, and never expected to hear again, thrilled through Mrs. Sutton's frame, and suspended for the moment the action of her heart, causing such evident emotion that she well-nigh sank to the ground.

All the colour fled from her cheeks. Even her lips became white; and Mr. Price, noticing her haggard looks, thought she must have been taken suddenly ill, and felt half inclined to spring across the counter to her assistance.

She raised her eyes towards the colonel, regarding him as steadfastly as she dared. Yes, it was he! But little changed—despite his grey hair and the honourable scar upon his cheek. She would have known him anywhere, and under any circumstances.

Did he know her? He stared hard at her—struck by the likeness to a long-forgotten and once dear face. But how should he know her? He believed—firmly believed—that she whom he had loved in years long gone by was dead. Nevertheless, this strange likeness to the lost one greatly startled him.

Mustering all her courage—and she had need of it—Mrs. Sutton passed him as firmly as she could. Her dress brushed him slightly as she went by, though he moved out of her way. How she sustained herself at that trying moment she could scarcely tell.

The colonel's curiosity being excited, he stepped to the counter, and addressing Mr. Price said,

"Can you oblige me, sir, with the name of the lady who has just gone out?"

"Mrs. Sutton," was the laconic reply.

"Good God! what a strong likeness!" mentally ejaculated the colonel, too much disturbed to ask any further questions.

Mrs. Sutton felt so extremely faint, that she was

obliged to enter a chemist's shop and procure some sal-volatile. The stimulant presently revived her, but she was still seated in the shop when the colonel and Captain de Vesci passed the door. Neither of them noticed her. They were talking loudly, and she distinctly heard the colonel observe to his friend,

"I wonder where the deuce that woman has gone to!" a remark that elicited a laugh from the captain.

Waiting till they were gone, she proceeded to her milliner's, whose shop was close at hand, and purchased one of those thick black veils which are as effectual a disguise as a loo-mask used to be to our great-grandmothers. Shrouded by this veil she felt more easy, and repaired to the White Hart, where, being well known, she was at once ushered to a private room up-stairs by the landlady, who seemed very glad to see her. She ordered a little luncheon, and at the same time asked for writing materials.

Left to herself, and having in some degree regained her composure, she strove to reflect on the extraordinary events that had recently taken place. The last occurrence seemed to her the strangest of all, and quite confounded her, upsetting all her schemes, and filling her with uneasiness.

She had every reason to suppose the colonel was in India, and could not comprehend what had brought him back. He could only have just returned, for she was certain she should have heard of his arrival from Mrs. Radcliffe if any mention had been made of it in the public journals. Yet he *had* returned. She had

heard his voice—had seen him. Here he was—on the spot.

How was this unlooked-for danger to be guarded against? A few days might possibly elapse before Mrs. Radcliffe heard of his return—but she was sure to hear of it ere long—in all probability from himself. Nothing more certain than he would be invited to Hazlemere. Equally certain that he would come.

Distraction was in the thought. Fate seemed at work. The peripeties of the dark drama in which she enacted the principal and not wholly guiltless part might be at hand.

From these meditations she was roused by the waiter, who placed writing materials on a small table beside her, and then proceeded to lay a cover for luncheon.

Her plans were now so disconcerted that she felt inclined to abandon her task; but at last she resolved to bid defiance to fate, and go on.

After tracing a few lines on a sheet of paper in bold, masculine characters, totally unlike her usual handwriting, she enclosed the bank-notes of large amount which she had just received, and secured the letter in an envelope, which she directed in the same bold hand.

She had just completed her task, when the waiter informed her that luncheon was ready, and asked if he should send her letter to the post. She thanked him, but declined, and put the letter in her bag.

She ate very little luncheon, but drank a glass of

sherry, as she still felt rather faint, and then ringing the bell, paid her bill and prepared to depart.

Voices in the entrance-hall beneath arrested her on the stairs. The colonel and De Vesci were there, lighting their cigars before going out. A narrow escape. A moment sooner, and she must have come upon them.

As soon as the coast was clear she descended, said a few civil words to the hostess, who was all smiles and politeness, and begged her respectful duty to Mrs. Radcliffe, and then proceeded to the station.

Not with the intention of returning to Gomshall, though. Her day's work was not yet done. She had another and a longer journey to perform.

X.

Colonel Delacombe.

SHE took a ticket by the South-Western Railway to London, and remained in the ladies' waiting-room till the train from Godalming came up. Then selecting a first-class carriage, which was nearly full, she got into it.

Till this moment she had dreaded another encounter with the colonel, but she now felt secure. But just when the train was about to start the door opened, and the very person she sought to avoid got in, and took the only vacant seat, which happened to be opposite her own.

Captain de Vesci, who had accompanied him to the door, muttered a word at parting, which caused the colonel to glance inquisitively at his vis-à-vis.

Mrs. Sutton's features were completely masked by her veil. Her eyes only could be distinguished, and she shrank back in her seat as far as she could.

Notwithstanding this, the colonel lost no time in addressing her. Assuming a most respectful manner, he observed that he fancied he must have seen her at the bank. No answer. He ventured to make the inquiry, because he had been struck by her extraordinary resemblance to a lady, whom he had known very intimately in former years. Under such circumstances she would excuse him. A slight inclination of the

head, but no further response. He next spoke of Guildford and Abbot's Hospital, which he had just visited—a very curious place—uncommonly curious. She had no interest whatever in Guildford, or in Abbot's Hospital. Finding all his attempts futile to engage her in conversation, he was compelled to desist.

He opened a newspaper, and while feigning to be occupied with it, stole an occasional glance at her. She felt he was watching her, but though trembling inwardly, did not betray the slightest emotion.

After awhile he changed his tactics, and began to converse with an elderly gentleman next him, and she fancied some parts of his discourse were intended for her ear. He informed this gentleman, who proved to be the rector of Woking, that he had just returned from India, and had landed at Southampton in the *Poonah*. He had since been at Aldershot, where his old regiment was stationed. He had been so long in India that everything appeared strange to him. Most of his friends were dead, and the few who were left must have forgotten him. As he made the latter remark, he glanced at Mrs. Sutton; but though listening attentively, she did not appear to notice what he said.

The rector and his son got out at Woking, and the colonel had again recourse to his newspaper. At Weybridge, the two other persons quitted the train, and he was left alone with the mysterious lady. Now he was determined to have an answer from her.

Rather abruptly, and in a somewhat different tone from that which he had previously adopted, he asked

if she had ever been in India. She answered faintly, "Never."

"Where can we have met then?" he cried. "That we *have* met before to-day I am certain. If not in India, it must have been in this country, upwards of twenty years ago. I have only had a momentary glimpse of your features, madam, but they recalled so vividly the face of one very dear to me, that if she were not lost to me for ever, I should have believed you were she herself. Even now I cannot wholly divest myself of the idea——"

"No more of this, I beseech you, sir," interrupted Mrs. Sutton. "I cannot—will not—listen to it. You are quite mistaken in me. We have never met before."

"By Heaven! the very voice!" cried the colonel. "If you have a spark of pity in your composition, madam, you will raise your veil."

But she showed no signs of compliance, though the request was still more passionately urged.

"Why do you refuse me?" he cried. "My conduct may appear impertinent, but, on my soul! I am influenced by no idle curiosity or improper motive. Doubts have been created in my mind that must be set at rest."

"I shall think you crazed if you continue in this strain, sir," she rejoined. "If I happen to resemble some one you have known, that is no reason why I should be subjected to annoyance. You are a perfect stranger to me."

"I am Seymour Delacombe. Does that name awaken no recollections in your breast?"

"None," she rejoined, firmly.

The colonel fell back in his seat, with something like a groan.

Looking up, shortly afterwards, he perceived that she had turned aside, and was hastily removing a handkerchief from her eyes.

"By Heaven! she is weeping," he mentally exclaimed. And his doubts being again roused by the discovery, he added, "I see you are moved, madam. I assure you it has not been my wish to distress or offend you. Far from it. I owe you an explanation of my conduct, and if you will permit me, I will give you such particulars of my history as relate to the unhappy lady, whose loss I deplore, and whom you so strangely resemble in feature, voice, and person."

"Pray spare me the recital, sir," she rejoined, with freezing coldness. "Doubtless the history is curious, but it can have no interest for me. I have no desire to be made the depositary of your secrets."

"I fear I have really offended you, madam—but it has been most inadvertently. I beg you to accept my excuses."

"I cannot accept them, sir. Either you or I must descend at the next station."

"I will relieve you of my society," he rejoined, haughtily. "It will not put me to much inconvenience to obey you, since I have no luggage with me. My *trunks* have been sent on to London. I deem it right

to acquaint you that I learnt your name at the Guildford bank—your name, and nothing more," he added, observing her start.

"If we ever meet again, it must be as entire strangers," she cried, in an agitated voice. "Promise me this, and we part friends."

"I promise it."

"On your word of honour?"

"On my word of honour."

"Enough."

On reaching Kingston, Colonel Delacombe bade her a ceremonious adieu. His tall, thin figure could be seen on the platform as the train departed.

He was vexed at being thus defeated, but he promised himself speedy revenge.

Mrs. Sutton pursued her journey in comparative tranquillity, and reached Waterloo-bridge Station without further adventure.

XI.

Mr. Page Thornton.

TAKING a cab, she drove at once to the General Post Office at Charing-cross, and registered the letter, in which she had enclosed the bank-notes at Guildford. She smiled with satisfaction when this was done.

She next told the cabman, who had waited for her, to proceed to Silver's, in Cornhill, and there dismissed him. At this large establishment, where every kind of habiliment, of every size and quality, can be had, she purchased articles of wearing apparel of the best description, sufficient to constitute a complete outfit, stating they were required by a young gentleman who was going out to India immediately. As she was provided with the requisite measure, there was no difficulty in the matter. Messrs. Silver supplied her with all she wanted. Having paid the bill, which was made out to Hilary St. Ives, Esq., she desired that it might be forwarded to him with the goods, to the address given. Messrs. Silver promised that her directions should be carefully attended to, and she departed.

This affair occupied some time, for she had been solicitous to choose such articles as would best suit Hilary, and she pleased herself with the idea of how much surprised he would be when he received the

packages. Her business was now ended, and her mind more easy. It would have been quite easy, if she had not encountered Colonel Delacombe. But she had his promise not to molest her, and she thought she could prevent him from coming to Hazlemere, at least, for the present.

Mrs. Sutton was very rarely in London, and still more rarely in the city, but, being there, she thought she might as well look about her.

Countryfolk are always attracted by shops, and she stopped to gaze at several richly-garnished windows as she passed along Cornhill. At last, she entered a jeweller's for the purpose of purchasing a birthday gift for May, and had just chosen a simple, pretty ring, set with an emerald, when an elderly gentleman came in, and, on beholding her, uttered an exclamation of astonishment. Unluckily, her veil was raised at the moment, and she could not let it fall.

A very gentlemanlike-looking old gentleman. About seventy—perhaps a trifle more—but looking very hearty for his years. His features had a sardonic expression, not devoid of humour, which lurked about his mouth, and his keen searching grey eyes, peering from under bushy brows, betokened great shrewdness. His round, red cheeks were scrupulously shaven. His attire was extremely neat; but it was the neatness of the old school, not of the new. He wore a low-crowned hat turned up at the sides, a chocolate-coloured coat with a velvet collar, and a white cravat. Though the day was particularly fine, he was armed with an umbrella.

To her infinite dismay, Mrs. Sutton recognised her mistress's father, old Mr. Page Thornton, of Chester.

"God bless me! Mrs. Sutton," he exclaimed. "Who would have thought of seeing you! How are you? And how are they all at Hazlemere?"

"All quite well, thank you, Mr. Thornton. I needn't ask how you are, sir. You are looking uncommonly well."

"Thankee—yes—quite as well as an old fellow can expect to be. But what are you doing in town, madam?"

Mr. Thornton was very inquisitive.

"Why, to tell you the truth, sir, I wanted to buy a little present for Miss May—to-morrow is her birthday, as you are aware—and not being able to meet with anything I liked at Guildford, I ran up to town."

"Exactly my own errand. I have come here to buy May a birthday present. Odd, ain't it? What have you bought, ma'am?"

Mrs. Sutton showed him the emerald ring.

"Ah! very pretty! But I must choose something else. Give me the benefit of your taste ma'am. You know what May would like."

"Anything from her grandpapa will please her, sir. But I see no reason why you should not give her a ring as well as myself."

"None on earth—ha! ha! I will. Girls load their fingers with rings now-a-days. Can't have too many—ha! ha! Help me to choose one."

On this hint a glittering assortment of jewelry was

placed before him, from which, with Mrs. Sutton's aid, he selected a diamond locket, a diamond star, a lovely sapphire ring, the prettiest little watch and chain imaginable, with some other ornaments, costing altogether nearly two hundred pounds, which he very cheerfully paid.

He then gave directions that his grand-daughter's name with the date, 1st May, 186—, should be engraved inside the watch.

The jeweller promised that this should be done in the course of a few hours, and asked where he should send the things.

"Pack them up carefully in a little box, and send them to me—Mr. Page Thornton—at the Langham Hotel, Portland-place. The box must be delivered into my own hands. I shall be at dinner at half-past seven."

The jeweller promised faithfully that the box should be brought to him at the Langham, at the hour appointed.

"A word with you, ma'am," said the old gentleman, taking Mrs. Sutton aside. "I'm coming to Hazlemere to-morrow. But don't mention it. Don't say you've seen me."

"I won't even say that I've been in town, sir."

"Ah! I see," he cried, with a knowing look. "Run up on the sly, eh? Never mind, I won't peach. But tell me! how does my grandson Oswald get on? In favour with his fair cousin, eh? You're in their secrets, I'll be sworn, Sutton."

"Indeed, I am not, sir. Mr. Oswald and Miss May are constantly together—that's all I know. But I think—mind, I only think—my young lady has had an offer this very morning from Sir Charles Ilminster."

"Sir Charles Ilminster of Boxgrove! Zounds! she must accept *him*."

"*Must* accept him, Mr. Thornton! You know very little of your grand-daughter, sir, to say so."

"Well, I mean she *ought* to accept him. Oswald must be thrown over. Mrs. Woodcot will be wofully disappointed, but that can't be helped. We must find some one else for the poor lad. Sir Charles has a sister—a widow—young and very handsome, I am told. *She* might do. I'll talk it over with Mrs. Radcliffe. But I'm keeping you here, ma'am. Where are you going, if it's fair to ask?"

Mrs. Sutton replied that she was going to the Cannon-street Station, whereupon he offered to escort her thither, and they left the shop together. As yet, Mrs. Sutton had said nothing respecting Hilary St. Ives; but as they walked along in the direction of Cannon-street—after a little debate with herself as to the prudence of alluding to him—she told the old gentleman of the guest they had got at Hazlemere, and under what strange circumstances he had been brought there.

Mr. Thornton listened to her narration with surprise and some displeasure; but when he learnt that Mrs. Radcliffe had invited Hilary to remain a few days to recruit, he became redder than ever in the face.

"Why ask him to stay?" he exclaimed, angrily.

"Because Mr. Radcliffe chose to play the Good Samaritan, why should she play the fool? Who is he? Some wretched adventurer—a strolling player, I'll be bound."

Mrs. Sutton strove to appease him, but he continued grumbling all the way till they reached the gates of the station.

While thanking him for his escort, Mrs. Sutton thought it well to caution him that he must know nothing about Mr. St. Ives on his arrival at Hazlemere on the morrow.

Mr. Thornton promised to be careful, and bidding her adieu, got into a hansom-cab and drove to the Langham Hotel.

As he was whirled rapidly through the crowded streets, he could not help thinking about Mrs. Sutton. "A very superior woman, indeed," he said to himself, "quite a lady. Upon my soul I can't make her out."

As he entered the large coffee-room of the Langham, he observed a gentleman seated at one of the tables, whose striking appearance at once attracted his attention. Feeling certain he knew the face, he applied to a waiter, and learnt that the gentleman was the very person he supposed—Colonel Delacombe. He at once marched towards him, and the colonel, looking up from his newspaper as he advanced, after a moment's hesitation recognised him, and arose. Explanations ensued, and they shook hands very cordially together. The meeting was as agreeable as unexpected, —particularly agreeable to the colonel, who immediately

began to make inquiries about Mrs. Radcliffe, and appeared enchanted with the good accounts given him of her by the old gentleman. Mr. Thornton, who was very proud of his daughter, assured him she was looking just as well as ever, which the colonel was quite ready to believe. Then the old gentleman began to talk about his grand-daughter, and expatiated on her beauty, but the gallant colonel would not admit that she could be so beautiful as her mother.

"Most people think May far better-looking than her mother," cried Mr. Thornton, "but I own——"

"Impossible!" exclaimed the colonel. "Esther Thornton—pardon me for calling her by that name!—was the most charming creature ever beheld. Her daughter may equal her, but cannot possibly surpass her. I am not going to be sentimental. Sentiment is not in my line now. But I assure you I was a long time in getting over that cruel disappointment. I suffered more from it than from any bodily wound, and I have received a good many."

"I can easily believe it, colonel. I know how much you were attached to Esther. I was obliged to act harshly in breaking off that engagement—contrary to my own feelings—but I did what I conceived to be my duty to my daughter."

"You acted very properly, Mr. Thornton—very wisely. Mr. Radcliffe has made her a devilish deal better husband than I should have done."

"Radcliffe has certainly made her an excellent husband, and perhaps all is for the best. She might have

been a great anxiety to you. You are aware she has had very poor health for years, and is now a confirmed invalid—when I say an invalid, I mean that she thinks herself one, and lives like one. I call her a *malade imaginaire*. And so she is; for she looks as well as ever, as I have just told you. Run down to Hazlemere when you have a few days to spare. Esther will be delighted to see you, and so will Radcliffe—he is a deuced good fellow, and not the least bit jealous—and you will make the acquaintance of my pretty little May. I am going there to-morrow, and will tell them I have seen you.”

“You will do me a great kindness, Mr. Thornton. I intended to drop Mrs. Radcliffe a line to inform her of my return, which, as I have explained, was much sooner than I anticipated, but you will say all that for me.”

They then had some further friendly chat, and as the colonel had no engagement, they agreed to dine together at seven o'clock. Mr. Thornton was rather fond of good cheer, and like Baron de Brisse, piqued himself upon his skill in arranging a menu.

The colonel left the matter entirely to him, and having ordered what he hoped would turn out to be a nice little dinner, he proposed a short promenade, and they went forth together, strolling down Bond-street and St. James's-street, looking in at the Carlton, to which club Mr. Thornton belonged, and proceeding to the Senior United Service Club, of which the colonel was a member, and where he announced his return.

During their walk, Colonel Delacombe met several acquaintances, all of whom seemed as much surprised as delighted to see him. The colonel was very chatty and agreeable. If his object was to ingratiate himself with the old gentleman, he succeeded to a marvel.

The dinner was first rate—at least the colonel said so. He had not eaten such a good dinner since the last time he dined with Mr. Thornton, he wouldn't say how many years ago. The old gentleman was much flattered. They managed to get through a bottle of perfectly-iced Clicquot, with a slight admixture of fine old sherry, and had just begun to test the merits of a bottle of Laffitte, of a famous vintage, which was placed upon the table when the cloth was drawn, when the waiter introduced a young man charged with a small box, which he said he was ordered to deliver into Mr. Thornton's own hands. The old gentleman said it was all right, and the messenger withdrew.

After explaining what the box contained, Mr. Thornton begged the colonel to excuse him for a moment while he locked it up.

On his return he remarked, "Apropos of that box of trinkets, I must relate an odd circumstance that occurred to me to-day. Chancing to be in Cornhill, quite by accident, I entered a jeweller's shop, with the design of purchasing a birthday gift for May, when whom should I stumble upon but my daughter's house-keeper, Mrs. Sutton. She had come there on the same errand as myself. Odd, wasn't it?"

"Very odd," remarked the colonel. "Did you say Mrs. Sutton?"

"Yes, that's the housekeeper's name, and a very superior person she is—not like a housekeeper at all—quite a lady, in fact. It appears that she went over to Guildford this morning."

"To Guildford!" exclaimed the colonel.

"Yes; and not finding exactly what she wanted for May, she came on to town, little dreaming she would meet *me*."

"And little dreaming that *I* should hear of her, and learn all about her," thought the colonel, greatly surprised.

Filling a bumper, he said, "Let us devote this glass to Mrs. Radcliffe. To-morrow you will drink your grand-daughter's health. To-day let us drink her mother's."

"With the greatest pleasure," replied Mr. Thornton. Reason was done to the toast.

Cheered by the generous wine, the old gentleman remarked with a droll look, "I've a proposition to make to you, colonel, which I hope you may find agreeable. Run down with me to Hazlemere to-morrow, and surprise Mrs. Radcliffe, ha! ha!"

"Are you serious, sir?" asked the colonel. "Or is this a jest? If you are in earnest, I'm more than half inclined to take you at your word. But all responsibility must rest with yourself."

"I'll ensure you a hearty welcome from Radcliffe; that's all you need trouble yourself about. Madame

will certainly be charmed to see you. Gad, it will be a surprise to *her*."

"And to Mrs. Sutton as well," thought the colonel.

Nothing could have pleased the colonel better, and he was quite as much tickled by the jest as the old gentleman was. Indeed, there was more in it to him than to Mr. Thornton.

Settled that they were to start for Hazlemere at a tolerably early hour in the morning.

Their bottle of claret finished, they adjourned to the smoking-room, where they continued to talk of by-gone days, of old friends, and of events that had occurred during the colonel's prolonged absence.

XII.

In what manner Mrs. Sutton obtained possession of the Documents.

ON consulting the time tables, Mrs. Sutton found there was no train that would answer her purpose before six o'clock, and having more than an hour to spare, she repaired to the refreshment-room, and partook of a slight repast.

Though quite unconscious of the danger that threatened her on the morrow, and never dreaming of the meeting that had taken place between Mr. Thornton and Colonel Delacombe, she was uneasy, and had a presentiment of coming ill.

While travelling homewards in the train, she revolved the strange events of the day, weighing the difficulties they were likely to give rise to, and which she might have to encounter.

The train was late, and it was not far from eight o'clock when she reached the Gomshall station. A fly was in waiting, for she had mentioned in the morning that she should require one on her return.

The night was clear and starlight, but, as we know, she had to pass through a district abounding in fine timber. Where the road was overshadowed by wide-branching trees, as it not unfrequently was, it was profoundly dark. The fly proceeded slowly, being drawn by a miserable horse.

A courageous woman, and possessing strong nerves, Mrs. Suddon did not feel any alarm, as she proceeded at the slow pace we have mentioned along the somewhat lonely road. She tried to compose her mind before her re-appearance at Hazlemere, and nothing occurred to disturb her until she had passed the lodge of Boxgrove Park.

The vehicle in which she sat was crawling up an ascent at a foot pace, when two men, whose appearance she did not like—though she could scarcely distinguish them through the gloom—suddenly emerged from the side of the hedge, where they seemed to have been lurking, and addressed a few words in rather gruff tones to the driver.

Involuntarily, the thought of the gipsies, by whom Hilary had been robbed, crossed her. These might be the very men—she knew the police suspected that they were still in the neighbourhood. The idea frightened her, for she had still a considerable sum of money about her, and she hastily concealed the notes about her person, leaving some ten or twelve sovereigns in her portemonnaie.

Her alarm, however, seemed groundless. After a few words with the driver, which, owing to her trepidation, she could not catch, the two men went on at a quick pace, and were soon lost to view.

Putting her head out of the window, she inquired of the coachman what they had said.

"They asked if I came from the Gomshall station," he replied; "and one on 'em wanted me to give him

a lift as far as Blackthorn Common, but I refused, not much liking their looks."

This explanation did not altogether relieve Mrs. Sutton's uneasiness, but nothing more happened till they got to the edge of the common, when the poor jade that had brought her thus far stumbled over something on the road, and when he got on his legs again it was evident he could go no further.

Presently the coachman appeared at the window, and, touching his hat, said:

"Sorry to tell you, ma'am, that you'll have to get out. My horse is dead lame. Accidents will happen, you knows, ma'am."

"Yes, but this is extremely vexatious. You have brought a very bad horse, and I shan't employ you again."

"The horse ain't a good un, I admit, ma'am. But it warn't exactly his fault. He fell over a great stone that seemed left in the road o' purpose."

"Well, I suppose I must walk. Luckily, we're not more than two miles from Hazlemere. Open the door, and let me out."

"Shall I go with you across the common, ma'am?"

"No," she replied in a decided tone, "I can take care of myself."

She had got about half way across the common without meeting with anything to alarm her, when fancying she heard footsteps, she turned her head, and, to her indescribable dismay, perceived the two men about a bowshot off, running fleetly and noiselessly

along the turf, with the evident design of overtaking her.

On seeing them she instantly started off, though with very slight chance of escape. Terror, instead of lending her wings, as it is said to do, on fearful emergencies like the present, seemed to deprive her of all strength.

Her pursuers gained rapidly upon her, and called to her to stop, loudly and menacingly.

Finding escape impracticable, and feeling, moreover, that she should speedily drop, she turned and faced them.

By the time they came up, she had regained her breath, and something of her courage.

"What do you want?" she cried, in as bold a tone as she could assume. "But I needn't ask. Your design is to rob me."

"No, we means you no harm, missis," replied the foremost of the two, who was no other than Reuben. "We have been on the look out for you. We saw you go to the station this morning, and managed to find out how you meant to return. We wants to have a word with you, if you please, missis," he added, doffing his cap, and speaking as civilly as he could.

"Say on then," rejoined Mrs. Suttton, who had now recovered her composure.

"Cut it short, Reuben," cried Seth Cooper, impatiently. "Ciwility's well enough in its way, but we *arn't* time for it just now. Come to the pint. Tell

Madam Sutton plainly as 'ow we wants to make a bargain wi' her."

"What! you know my name?" she exclaimed.

"Ay, and we knows summat more nor your name, missis," rejoined Seth.

"We also know how to hold our tongues, missis," observed Reuben, more courteously.

"If you know me, I am equally aware whom I have to deal with," said Mrs. Sutton. "You are the two men who robbed and maltreated Mr. Hilary St. Ives on Wootton Heath the other night."

"Granted," replied Reuben. "We don't deny the fact. We wos lucky enough to light on Mr. St. Ives t'other night. We wos lucky enough to get hold of his papers, and we now counts on selling 'em to advantage."

"Werry walerable they is to you, Madam Sutton, as you'll find," remarked Seth, significantly. "Secrets is safe wi' us. But you mightn't like to trust other folk wi' 'em. We've run great risks in stayin' hereabouts—wi' the perlice at our 'eels—chiefly on your account, and we must be compensated. Wot are we to get for the papers?"

"Have you got them with you?" she demanded.

"Ay," he rejoined. "We don't trust 'em out ov our own keeping."

"You shall have twelve sovereigns—all my purse contains," she replied.

"That's very little," said Reuben. "Them dockyments is worth hundreds to you, missis."

"Twelve suvrins!" cried Seth, scornfully. "We can't take it. Consider the risk we've run to sarve you, Madam Sutton. Be you sartin you've got no more about you?"

"A great chance that I have so much," she replied, now convinced that it was needless to offer more.

The villains held a brief consultation together, during which Mrs. Sutton watched them anxiously. To her infinite relief and satisfaction she saw they meant to comply.

Pulling out a large packet from his pouch, Seth stepped towards her, holding it in his hand.

"Here's the papers," he said; "not one on 'em a-missin', I'll take my Bible oath on it."

"And here's my purse," she replied, giving it to him.

"Count the money, Reuben," cried Seth, handing the purse to him.

"A dozen suvrins, all right," said Reuben.

"Then take the papers, missis," cried Seth, delivering the packet to her, "and good luck go wi' 'em. You've got the best o' the bargain."

"And now we'll wish you good night, Madam Sutton," said Reuben. "You'll hear no more of us. Long afore daybreak we shall be miles away from Wootton."

And they flew with the swiftness of hunted deer across the common.

"Now, indeed, I feel secure," cried Mrs. Sutton, pressing the packet exultingly to her breast.

Half an hour afterwards she arrived at Hazlemere, pale and exhausted. Naturally, her first business was to lock up the precious packet, reserving its examination for another season.

After giving such orders as were necessary, she repaired to Hilary's room, and was glad to find that still further improvement had taken place in him since morning. He was in very good spirits, and looking forward with pleasurable anticipation to the morrow.

She sat with him for some little time, and then proceeded to the boudoir, where she had a long conversation with her mistress.

But she did not tell her why she went to Guildford, nor whom she had seen there. Neither did she explain what had subsequently befallen her.

XIII.

May's Birthday.

VERY pleasant to be nineteen, as many of my fair readers must have experienced. Especially pleasant to a lovely girl full of health and spirit—no cloud on her past existence, and a bright future before her.

She who could now count nineteen springs arose betimes on that bright auspicious morn—for everything seemed to smile on her—and arraying herself in white, descended to the housekeeper's room to bid her good morrow, before going out into the garden.

A very nice little parlour indeed. Tastefully furnished, and well provided with cupboards and store-closets.

Mrs. Sutton was by herself, busily occupied in preparations for the day, but she discontinued her task as May came in, and embracing her with more than her usual warmth, offered her every good wish proper to the occasion.

Rarely was the housekeeper so demonstrative. Gazing fondly in May's fair face, and still holding her in her arms, she exclaimed,

"How well you are looking on your birthday, dear. Ah!" she added, vainly trying to repress a sigh, "I wish I had a heart as light as yours. I once had—though not at nineteen. My morn of life was soon

overcast. All good angels guard you, dear! May you long continue as blithe and free from care as you are now!"

May was sensibly moved by the housekeeper's evident emotion, but Mrs. Sutton speedily recovered her usual serenity.

"I have a little present for you, dear," she said. "It is of slight value, but I hope you will accept it as a token of your old nurse's affection. Wear this for my sake."

And she gave her the emerald ring.

Thanking her with effusion, May told her, as she put the ring on her taper finger, that nothing could have pleased her better than the gift, adding that she would always wear it.

"Always, dear?"

"Always," replied May, earnestly. "And now, dear Sutton," she continued, taking a chair, "I have something to say to you."

First closing the door, the housekeeper sat down beside her, putting on a look calculated to invite confidence.

She understood at once the nature of the communication about to be made to her, when May mentioned—not without a blush—that Lady Richborough and Sir Charles Ilminster were coming over to Hazlemere in the course of the morning.

"Merely to offer you compliments and good wishes, I presume?" observed Mrs. Sutton.

"Not exactly. I dare say they are quite ignorant that it is my birthday."

"Perhaps, then, Sir Charles may be coming for an answer to a certain letter which he sent yesterday." And she added, with a smile, "A little bird has told me all about it, you see, dear."

"That little bird tells you everything, Sutton."

"Your mamma told me this, because she knows how much I am interested in all that concerns you, dear. Well, what is the answer to be? Have you made up your mind?"

"Not yet," replied May, shaking her head. "That is why I desire to consult you. I know you will give me good advice."

"That I will, darling—the best in my power. The offer requires consideration."

"Mamma declares it requires *no* consideration. I am not of her opinion."

"Nor I. But I mean that such an offer ought not to be hastily rejected. Would you not like to be Lady Ilminster?"

"A title does not dazzle me, Sutton."

"But Sir Charles has many recommendations besides his high position. He is a perfect gentleman—distinguished in appearance and manner. I saw him yesterday, and thought so. What is your objection to him?" she asked, regarding her fixedly.

"I have really no objection to make to him—except that he does not interest me. Frankly, Sutton, I do not think I could ever love him."

Much relieved by this avowal, but carefully dissembling her satisfaction, the housekeeper rejoined, "If such is your firm determination, dear, you will do well to decline Sir Charles's offer. Otherwise, you will run the risk of entailing unhappiness on yourself and on him. Mutual affection I hold to be an indispensable ingredient in married life."

"You are right, Sutton," observed May, completely duped by her artful counsellor. "The risk in unnecessary, since I am perfectly happy as I am."

"Well, I cannot but applaud your determination, though I own I am surprised at it. Rank has generally an irresistible attraction to our sex. And now, since Sir Charles is disposed of, may I venture to say a word in favour of some one else—of one who professes to love you dearly?"

"I guess what is coming," cried May, smiling. "But proceed."

"Your cousin Oswald unbosomed himself to me as we drove to the station, and told me what you had said to him. But I fancied on second thoughts you might change your mind. May I console the poor young gentleman? May I give him a hope?"

May shook her head.

"He had his final answer yesterday," she remarked.

"Then I am to understand that your heart is quite disengaged? Look me in the face, and tell me so—if you can."

"I can, Sutton. 'My heart is my own,' as the

song says," cried May, fixing her clear truthful eyes upon her as she spoke. "Take this assurance also: I will never wed any man unless I love him."

Mrs. Sutton smiled approval, and reflected for a moment. A favourable opportunity seemed to have occurred for bringing up Hilary St. Ives, and she determined not to let it slip.

Somewhat changing her manner, she remarked, "Laugh, if you please, at what I am going to say to you, dear—laugh, but listen. While I was nursing the young gentleman who has been so strangely placed under my care, a singular idea occurred to me, and I have not been able to divest myself of it since. Possibly his good looks—he is extremely good-looking, dear—may have prompted the notion. At any rate, it came into my head."

Pleased to find her listener's curiosity excited, she went on, after a well-calculated pause:

"Fate, I thought to myself, must have brought him here for a special purpose. What can the purpose be? The answer came immediately. He must be destined for May."

Great was the young lady's surprise. Throwing herself back in her chair, she laughed aloud. "For *me!*" she exclaimed. "Did you say for *me*, Sutton?"

"For you, dear," replied the housekeeper, in no way disconcerted. "Such was the idea that forced itself upon me. There *is* such a thing as destiny."

"There may be," replied May, still laughing. "But

mine is not mixed up with that of Mr. Hilary St. Ives."

With affected gravity, though she could scarcely maintain a serious countenance, she then added, "Are you quite sure, Sutton, that the whole affair is not a contrivance of your own to get this young man into the house? It looks very, very suspicious."

"I bring him here!" ejaculated the housekeeper, petrified by the accusation. "What next? If there has been a plot, your papa and Mr. Oswald have been the chief actors in it, and I don't think you will suspect *them*."

"Neither do I suspect *you*, you dear, kind, absurd creature. Don't you perceive I was only jesting? You deserve to be laughed at for your folly. Mamma is just as silly. She raves about this young man's good looks. He seems to have turned both your foolish heads. But don't say a word more in his praise I beg of you, or I shall positively dislike him, and I don't desire to do that. By-the-by, is he coming down to breakfast?"

"I believe so. I have heard nothing to the contrary. He wished to be called early, and Boston has gone up to his room some time ago."

"That reminds me you will have to change his room to-day, since grandpapa is coming."

"Yes, I mean to give him the little bachelor's room, next to Mr. Oswald's. It looks upon the garden, and will suit him to a T. Perhaps you will assert next

that I have invited him to stay, in pursuance of my deeply-laid scheme."

"No, I won't, dear Sutton, for I am aware it was mamma who asked him. Forgive me for teasing you. You must not be cross with your little pet on her birthday. Come with me to the garden."

"Not just now," replied the housekeeper, rising, as if with the intention of resuming her work. "I've a great deal to do."

"Nay, you shall come, or I shall think you really angry. I'll gather you the prettiest nosegay possible in return for the ring."

Mrs. Sutton yielded. Indeed, she required very little persuasion. So they went into the garden together.

The gardens and grounds at Hazlemere were tolerably large—large enough, at all events, to require the attention of three or four gardeners besides extra hands. Laid out in the landscape style by a disciple of Payne Knight, they were extremely well kept, for Mr. Radcliffe spared no expense upon his place. He had plenty of "glass," and his head-gardener, Kenneth M'Donald, a Scotsman, as his name imported, had won no end of prizes for grapes and pineapples. Magnificent were the show peaches and nectarines—superb the strawberries grown by Kenneth M'Donald, gardener to Theobald Radcliffe, Esq., of Hazlemere. Our business, however, is not with the produce of the gardens, but with the gardens themselves, of which we must attempt to give the reader some slight notion.

A broad terrace, or rather platform, artificially raised several feet above the lawn, extended in front of the house, and led on past arabesque parterres, embroidered with box, and filled with flowers and dwarf flowering shrubs, towards an inclosure latticed with wire, and appropriated to gold and silver pheasants and ring-doves. Further on were the greenhouse and hothouses. A splendid wistaria, a couple of fine magnolias—one of which, a "*conspicua*," was in full flower—with roses and jasmines, covered the walls near the terrace.

A flight of stone steps led down to another broad gravel walk which followed the course of the terrace, and opened upon the smooth-shaven lawn, or rather series of lawns. Near the house the ground was level, but further on it sloped gently down to a small but well-timbered park, from which it was only divided by iron hurdles. The lawns were interspersed with scattered trees, clumps of rhododendrons, which grew to great size, and other early flowering shrubs, with countless beds of roses. Pleasant walks led to pleasant spots, disclosing fresh beauties at every turn—a summer-house half hidden in a bosquet—a rustic bench beneath a spreading tree. Nothing was neglected. A large green patch of smoothest turf, flat as a billiard-table, served the double purpose of a bowling-green and a ground for croquet. A long shady walk brought you to the coppices skirting the park. Another walk led through the intricacies of a thicket to a sequestered glen, abounding in heaths,

ferns, and alpine plants, and where an abundant spring, gushing forth amid the rocks, immediately formed a rivulet. At the end of the ravine was the miniature lake, whence Mr. Radcliffe's residence derived its name.

Returning from this sequestered glen to the sunshiny terrace from which we have strayed, we shall find, on casting our eyes around, that it commands a diversified country, wild and heathy in parts, but generally well cultivated, covered for the most part with timber, and embellished by many a stately mansion. On the left the prospect is bounded by the North Downs—on the right by a lower range of chalk hills.

But let us confine ourselves to Hazlemere. We need not search elsewhere for beauty. It lies before us. Gardens and pleasure grounds alike are charming, and could not be seen in greater perfection than on this enchanting May morning, when the smooth lawns are flooded with sunshine, when the air is filled with the perfume of flowers, and the groves are vocal with melody. The blackbird and the speckled thrush venture near us, plainly manifesting by their tameness how kindly treated they are by the fair young mistress of Hazlemere, whose natal day we celebrate. Poets—the greatest of poets—have sung the delights of May Day morn; but Milton himself never hymned a May morn more exquisite.

On issuing forth upon the terrace, May and her companion stood still to inhale the balmy odours

arising from the flower-beds, and listen to the choristers in the groves. Both were enraptured by the beauty of the day. May felt joyous as the morn itself; and even Mrs. Sutton, exhilarated by the genial influences, was able for the moment to cast off her cares.

"Look, Sutton, here come my pretty pets to bid me good morrow," cried May, as a pair of blackbirds ran along the lawn as if to greet her.

Other birds followed, and after properly rewarding the attentions of her feathered favourites, May proceeded to gather the promised nosegay for the house-keeper. They then descended to the lawn, and took their way towards some distant parterres, where M'Donald and another gardener were engaged in filling a basket with flowers for the decoration of the breakfast-table. The lovely queen of the fête was attended in her march across the velvet turf by her faithful blackbirds and thrushes. M'Donald, a good-looking man with a fiery-red beard, took off his cap as she approached, and in his racy Doric, and with a heartiness that bespoke sincerity, offered her his best wishes on the occasion. The basket being nearly full, he asked if he should take it to the house. Mrs. Sutton bade him do so, giving him at the same time some directions as to the arrangement of the flowers. She also reminded him that he and the under-gardener were expected at dinner in the servants' hall, where they would have an opportunity of drinking the health of their young mistress.

Just as the gardener was departing, May inquired

if he had seen her cousin, and M'Donald rejoined that Mr. Oswald had been there not ten minutes ago, but had gone down towards the lake to smoke a cigar, and give Neptune a swim.

M'Donald and his man then took the basket and proceeded towards the house, while May and the housekeeper walked on in the opposite direction.

They were chatting together near a rose-bed, when May chanced to turn her head, and perceived M'Donald coming back. He was supporting a tall young man, who walked rather feebly, and who certainly could not have got so far without the aid of the gardener's strong arm.

In this young man she had no difficulty in recognising Hilary St. Ives.

XIV.

Hilary's Story.

HILARY, it appeared, had seen them from his chamber window, which commanded the terrace and lawn, and unable to resist the impulse that prompted him to join them, hastily completed his toilet, and made his way to the garden. When he gained the terrace they were gone, but perceiving them at a distance, he was moving slowly in that direction, when M'Donald came up, and noting his debility, at once offered him his arm. Naturally, the gardener was aware of the circumstances under which Hilary had been brought to the house, and as they walked along he expressed his satisfaction at the young man's recovery. He also thought it right to communicate the fact that it was Miss May's birthday, adding, "She is the bonniest young leddy in all England, and as gude and kind-hearted as she is bonnie."

"Why, I declare, there is Mr. St. Ives," cried May, on seeing him.

"Yes, 'tis he, sure enough," rejoined the housekeeper. And though secretly pleased, she added, "How very foolish of him to venture forth in this way. I must scold him. He quite miscalculates his strength."

"Yes, he seems very feeble. Go to him, Sutton."

The housekeeper immediately hurried forward, while May followed more leisurely.

As Mrs. Sutton came up, M'Donald felt that his services were no longer needed, and, touching his cap, he retired.

The housekeeper blamed her patient for coming out without her permission, but her looks belied her words, and showed she was not much displeased.

"I merely wished to pay my respects to Miss Radcliffe," observed Hilary, in a deprecatory tone. "May I beg you to present me to her?"

Mrs. Sutton smiled graciously, and, giving him her arm, led him towards the young lady, who had stopped at a short distance from them.

As they slowly advanced, May had an opportunity of scrutinising the young man's appearance, and she mentally admitted that her mother's and Mrs. Sutton's praises of his good looks were not undeserved. He was still very pale, and evidently suffering from the effects of the injuries he had received, but this expression was calculated to excite sympathy.

On his part, Hilary experienced sensations hitherto unknown to him. Dazzled by May's beauty, he scarcely dared to raise his eyes towards her, and trembled at the thought of entering into her presence. His emotion became so great that he was obliged to halt for a moment, and May, attributing the pause to increased debility, stepped quickly forward, and in a few kind and sympathetic words expressed her concern.

Her accents vibrated through Hilary's frame, and

made the blood rush to his heart, tending to heighten his confusion; but her gentle looks soon reassured him. Thanking her for the interest she displayed in his condition, he assured her he was better, and forced a smile to corroborate his words. Mrs. Sutton, who watched them both narrowly, then introduced him to the young lady, and the ice being now fairly broken, he quickly recovered his self-possession, and was able to converse in a manner that left the anxious housekeeper no doubt as to the impression he was likely to produce. Decidedly May was pleased with his manner. Nor did the interest with which he had at first inspired her at all decrease on further acquaintance with him. The few words in which he besought her to accept his best wishes were appropriate and earnest, and he was lavish in his expressions of gratitude for the extraordinary kindness and consideration shown him since his arrival at Hazlemere.

After stating that the misadventure that had occurred to him, combined with the loss of his papers, had upset all his plans, he added, with some little gallantry, that he could not regret it. At Mrs. Sutton's suggestion they proceeded to a rustic bench beneath a tree, where they all sat down, and the discourse continued. Encouraged by his manner, May ventured to ask him a few questions about himself, to which he replied with great frankness.

"I am afraid I shall sink very much in your esteem, Miss Radcliffe, when you learn my history," he said; "but it is only proper you should be made acquainted

with it. Do not be startled if I am obliged to confess that I do not know my origin. I am not even certain that the name I bear is my rightful one. A mystery hangs over my birth, which I had hoped to unravel, but which may now be never cleared up since those papers are gone. With them I fear I have lost all chance of penetrating the secret."

"Since the papers were in your own possession, what prevented you from referring to them, and ascertaining the secret?" inquired May.

"The packet was entrusted to me on the express condition that it should not be opened, except in the presence of a person whom I was to meet at a certain place and at a certain hour in London. With his permission—and his permission only—were the seals to be broken. The packet is irrecoverably lost, and the time of meeting has long since past."

"And you faithfully observed your engagement?" remarked May. "Had I been in your place, I do not think I could have resisted the temptation to open the packet. What say you, Sutton?"

"I think Mr. St. Ives deserves great credit for his forbearance," rejoined the housekeeper. "Few persons would have acted so well."

"Having given my promise, I could not violate it," said Hilary.

"But you know the name of the person whom you were to meet in London, and though you failed in the appointment, owing to unforeseen circumstances, you can still find him?" observed May.

"I am entirely unacquainted with his name or address," replied Hilary. "The person was carefully described to me. The place of rendezvous was St. James's Park. Had I met him and satisfied him, I have reason to believe that a new career would have been opened to me, which might have led eventually to fortune. At any rate," he added, in a sombre tone, "I should have learnt who I am."

After a moment's pause he continued:

"I fear you will despise me, Miss Radcliffe, after the disclosure I have just made to you, but I could not allow you to remain in ignorance of my exact position, and I beg you will explain it to Mrs. Radcliffe and your father. Say that I am a mere nameless adventurer—I am really nothing more—whom chance has brought beneath their roof, and that I am prepared to quit it at once, should they desire me to do so, full of gratitude for their kindness. My history may be summed up in a few words. Its details would have little interest for you. That I have been abandoned by my parents is certain—from what causes I can only conjecture."

Mrs. Sutton, who had become deathly pale during his recital, averted her gaze as he looked at her.


"I know nothing but what has been told me. Those who had charge of me stated that my mother was dead, but that my father was living and in India. However, I should never be allowed to see him or learn his name. In other words, I was given plainly to understand that he would never acknowledge me."

"But you were not utterly abandoned?" cried May,

in a compassionate tone. "I will not think so badly of human nature as to suppose so."

"No. In some respects I have had no reason to complain. Money was regularly sent for my maintenance and education, and the amount was increased, as occasion required. Mr. and Mrs. Courtenay, the persons with whom I was placed, dwelt in Exeter, near the South Gate. They were perfectly faithful to their trust. At no time, however closely questioned, would they reveal by whom the allowance was made. Perhaps they were kept in ignorance themselves.

"The Courtenays were very respectable people, not in a very exalted station in society, but tolerably well to do, and strictly honest. They had no family, and treated me with almost parental affection. Indeed, in my earlier years I looked upon myself as their son. I was educated at a public school in the city. Mr. Courtenay, who had my welfare at heart, wished me to take a situation, which he would readily have procured me. But business did not suit me. By this time I had become acquainted with my position. Believing myself to be a gentleman born, I determined to do nothing inconsistent with the character of a gentleman. I have since seen the absurdity of my notions, and regret that I did not follow Mr. Courtenay's advice. But I was then a hot-headed boy. I became restless and dissatisfied, and, not knowing what to do with me, Mr. Courtenay supplied me with funds to go abroad; *glad, I make no doubt, to get rid of me, for with my*



foolish fancies and pretensions, I must have been a sad trouble to him.

"I spent three years in various parts of France—chiefly at Toulouse, Tarascon, and other towns near the Pyrenees, where I could live cheaply. I ought to have mentioned that I was always fond of drawing, and have some little talent in that line, which I now began to cultivate assiduously. I turned artist. My sketches of picturesque scenes among the Pyrenees, with groups of peasantry, were sufficiently admired to sell.

"I next proceeded to Paris, intending to establish myself there as a professional artist, and I might have succeeded in my design, for I had no lack of encouragement, if my unlucky pride had not stood in my way. I could not stoop to certain things that are indispensable to success.

"Quitting Paris in disgust—disgusted with myself I ought to say—I went to the Channel Islands, where I lingered for some months pursuing my avocations, and then returned to England. Resting at Southampton for a couple of weeks, I crossed over to Ringwood, and occupied myself in sketching the romantic scenery in the neighbourhood of that town.

"During this time I had communicated with Mr. Courtenay, and he came over to Ringwood to see me, bringing with him the all-important packet of which I have been unluckily deprived. He gave me the instructions which I have recapitulated to you, and I at last promised myself a solution of the mystery that has

hitherto hung over my birth. You know how I have been disappointed. However, let that pass. I must finish my tale.

"Being a good pedestrian, I determined to proceed to London on foot. To accomplish this without hindrance, I consigned my luggage and portfolios to Mr. Courtenay. I allowed myself three days for the walk. On the fourth day I undertook to be in St. James's Park at the hour appointed. You know the rest."

May had listened to his narration with an interest which she did not care to dissemble. A slight melancholy in the tone of his voice touched her feelings, while the romantic cast of his countenance harmonised with the account he gave of himself. She seemed to understand him better now she knew he was an artist.

"My pride would not allow me to make this confession to your mother," he said; "and I therefore returned somewhat evasive answers to her questions. But to *you*, Miss Radcliffe, I would not appear other than I am—a poor nameless artist."

"What better can you be than an artist?" she cried, with an enthusiasm that charmed him. "And you will soon win a name. Do not relinquish your career."

"I will not since you enjoin me to pursue it."

"I have no right to give you any advice," she said, blushing deeply, and feeling she had gone too far; "but if you possess the genius for which I give you credit, you ought not to be diverted by any consideration

from the path which is plainly pointed out to you, and which may lead to renown. Hereafter, the misfortune that has just occurred to you will appear as nothing."

"I have already said that I do not regard the occurrence as a misfortune. How can I feel otherwise than elated by the encouragement you deign to give me. If I rise in my profession to the height you have assigned me, I shall date my success from this day."

The words were uttered with so much fervour, and accompanied by a look expressing such profound homage, that May almost involuntarily cast down her eyes.

Mrs. Sutton, who had listened to what had passed, with deep but repressed emotion, now deemed it necessary to interpose, and after a few remarks upon the singularity of Hilary's story, said,

"Excuse the liberty I am about to take in putting a question, but I observe that you wear a signet ring with a coat of arms engraved on it. Whose are the arms?"

"I cannot tell you. The ring was given me the other day by Mr. Courtenay, but without any explanation. He charged me to show it to the gentleman who was to meet me in St. James's Park, in proof of my identity."

May uttered an exclamation of surprise, and asked to look at the ring. He took it off to show it her.

She had just returned it to him, after a moment's examination of the armorial bearings, when Boston, the valet, was seen advancing towards them. He was

the bearer of some letters, three or four of which he delivered to May, and then to Hilary's great surprise, handed one to him.

"For me!" exclaimed the young man. "Impossible! who can know that I am here?"

Boston smiled. He could offer no explanation. It was a registered letter, and with it was a small slip of paper, which Hilary signed with a pencil, and the valet departed.

The young man gazed in astonishment at the letter. It was unquestionably addressed to himself, in bold masculine characters—Hilary St. Ives, Esq.—with Theobald Radcliffe, Esq., Hazlemere House, Wootton, Surrey. His astonishment, however, was increased in a tenfold degree, when, after bowing to May, he opened the letter, and perceived its contents.

"Bank notes!" he ejaculated, scarcely able to credit his senses. "Bank notes to the amount of five hundred pounds! I must surely be dreaming."

"No, I will answer for it you are awake," cried May, who was almost equally surprised. "I can see the bank notes plainly myself."

Mrs. Sutton, who had risen from her seat, under the pretence of gathering a flower, now returned, feigning quite as much astonishment as the others.

"This letter may afford some explanation," cried Hilary.

And he read aloud as follows:

"The friend who watches over you has heard of *the disaster* that has befallen you. Do not be down-

cast. All will be well. The enclosed remittance of five hundred pounds is made that you may not be inconvenienced in regard to money. You shall have more, should you require it. You will hear again from me before long. Meantime, a supply of wearing apparel and other necessities will be sent you."

"Have you ever heard from the writer of that letter before?" asked Mrs. Sutton, in the most natural manner imaginable.

"Never," he replied. "I do not know the handwriting. It is certainly not Mr. Courtenay's."

"You are not neglected, you see," cried May. "What an extraordinary circumstance!"

"Extraordinary indeed!" echoed Hilary. "But by no means disagreeable. I never had so much money before."

They were still talking the matter over when Boston reappeared, and informed Hilary that a large chest had just arrived for him.

"Another wonder!" he exclaimed.

"Of course it contains the wearing apparel and other things mentioned in the letter," observed May.

"No doubt," observed Mrs. Sutton. "Let the chest be taken to the room next to Mr. Oswald's," she added to Boston.

And the valet again departed.

XV.

The Sketch.

SECRETLY delighted with the success of her scheme, and equally well pleased with the favourable impression which she saw Hilary had produced on her young lady, Mrs. Sutton declared she could not remain out a moment longer, as she had a great deal to do. On this hint May immediately rose to accompany her, and Hilary rose likewise, having first secured his letter with its valuable contents. The housekeeper was just about to offer him her arm when they were arrested by the cheery voice of Oswald, who was hastening towards them, and came up the next moment. He was attended by Neptune, the water-spaniel, whose dripping coat showed he had been in the lake. Mrs. Sutton availed herself of this opportunity to escape, and with a glance at May hurried towards the house. Neptune bounded towards his young mistress, and barked joyously as if offering her a greeting. A slight feeling of jealousy was awakened in Oswald's bosom when he perceived Hilary. However, he nodded good naturally to him, but addressed himself in the first instance to May, as in duty bound.

"Good morrow, fair coz," he cried. "If I were a poet I would have prepared a sonnet for the occasion,

but as I have no talent in that line, you must accept my good wishes clothed in the plainest prose."

May thanked him, but told him she had expected to find him in the garden when she first came out.

"Do not suppose I have missed you," she added. "I have been very much interested by some details which Mr. St. Ives has been giving me of his history. Are you aware he is an artist?"

"An artist!" cried Oswald, looking at the young man with an undefinable expression. "Perhaps I ought to have guessed it, but I really did not—an artist, eh?"

"Yes, an artist, though not a very distinguished one," replied Hilary, bowing.

"You know how fond I am of drawing, Oswald," cried May. "Mr. St. Ives must give me a few lessons."

The young man said he should be charmed to do so. "But I suspect you have very little to learn from me, Miss Radcliffe," he added.

"By Jove, you are right," cried Oswald, laughing. "My cousin May draws wonderfully, and has quite a turn for caricature. She made a sketch of me and Neptune t'other day, that is worthy of a place in *Punch*. I have it with me, and will show it you."

"I for did you!" cried May.

But at an imploring look from Hilary she relented, and the sketch was produced.

Very clever and very droll. Oswald was certainly caricatured, but the likeness was unmistakable. Neptune was admirably drawn.

"What do you think of it?" said Oswald. "Clever, eh?"

"Capital!" exclaimed Hilary. "You do not require any instructions from me, Miss Radcliffe. I despair of rivalling this sketch, but I will attempt to make a companion to it, if you will give me two or three minutes."

May graciously assented, curious to test his skill.

"Ah, I forgot," he exclaimed, with a look of disappointment, "I have no materials with me."

"They are easily procured," said May. "I won't let you off. Fly, Oswald. My sketch-book is in the drawing-room. Bring a pencil with you."

A word from his fair cousin was a command for Oswald. He ran swiftly towards the house, and was back again almost immediately, bringing with him the things he had been sent for.

"Now, then, let us see what you can do," he cried, as he gave them to Hilary. "Ten to one you don't equal May's performance."

"I should lose the wager if I took it," replied Hilary. "I won't tax your patience too severely, Miss Radcliffe," he added. "You can't be better placed than you are."

"Pray introduce Neptune."

"And your humble servant," added Oswald.

Seating himself upon the bench, Hilary opened the sketch-book, and finding a blank page, at once set to work, with a rapidity and freedom of touch that augured well for the successful execution of his task. Conscious

of his own power he had no misgiving. With the quick eye of a true and practised artist, he seized upon all May's charms of feature and person, and transferred them with almost photographic accuracy, and yet with a grace that no photograph can reach, to the sheet of paper before him. May's colour rose as she felt his keen dark eye fixed upon her, but she did not alter her position. Couched at her feet, Neptune remained quiet, though looking up at her face.

In an inconceivably short space of time Hilary had completed his task. A masterly sketch. May was reproduced to the life, in all her grace and beauty. She blushed with pleasure as the sketch was submitted to her.

"I have not done you justice, but that is impossible," observed Hilary.

"You have flattered me very much," rejoined May.

"No such thing," cried Oswald. "The sketch is wonderfully like. 'Pon my soul, you are a devilish clever artist, St. Ives, that I must say. But I bargained for a place, and you have left me out altogether. Too bad."

"I will take you some other time," rejoined Hilary, smiling.

"You think I should have spoiled the sketch, eh?"

"I did not say so, or mean so. You will see that I have dated the sketch, Miss Radcliffe. May I venture to beg your acceptance of it as a trifling memorial of the day."

Graciously accepted.

"I must show the sketch to mamma," cried May. "It will enchant her. I am going to her room. Have I permission to relate your history to her? She will be so much interested by it."

"You will oblige me by doing so," replied Hilary.

And she tripped off towards the house, followed by Neptune.

Certain it is that Oswald had already become jealous of the handsome young stranger, who had somehow contrived to interest his fair cousin; but he was very good-hearted, and tried to keep down the feelings of dislike and distrust which he felt rising in his breast. After all, he thought, the young chap is only an artist. So as soon as May was gone he put on rather a patronising manner, and said,

"That sketch of Miss Radcliffe is capital. I must have a copy of it—hang the price."

"I shall be very happy to copy the sketch for you. But I cannot accept payment," replied Hilary, rather haughtily.

"Too proud, eh?"

"No, not too proud," rejoined the other. "But I am under great obligations to you, and shall be delighted to make any little return in my power."

"I tell you what it is, my dear fellow," cried Oswald, who, though very good-natured, was apt to commit blunders. "I think I can find you a good job."

"I do not require a job," rejoined the other, coldly.

"Hear what it is, before you decline it. There's a *devilish* handsome woman coming here this morning—

Lady Richborough. Perhaps you may have heard of her, or seen her?"

Hilary shook his head.

"Well, she's a stunner—handsome enough to take away your breath. Hasn't she a seat on horseback?—Miss Reynolds is nothing to her. Can't she handle a cue? I rather think so. I played with her at billiards yesterday. Every attitude was a study. I couldn't strike a ball, and got knocked to pieces in no time. I think I could get her to sit to you—or you might sketch her off-hand, as you took my cousin May just now."

"Anything you wish. Command me."

"Thanks. I know you'll be struck of a heap when you see her ladyship. Her brother, Sir Charles Ilminster, wouldn't make a bad portrait, and I dare say he'd sit, if I asked him. I will, if you like. They were both talking about you yesterday—wondering who you were; but I couldn't tell them you are an artist, for I didn't know it myself then."

"Don't fancy for a moment that I am ashamed of my profession. But I don't care to obtrude it."

"Exactly. I understand. No man need be ashamed of his profession—whatever it may be—provided it's respectable. Perhaps Sir Charles may invite you to Boxgrove. If he does, go. Picturesque old place. Just suit you. Lots of artists go to see it. Maclise and Calderon went to see it a few weeks ago. Nash has it in his 'Mansions of the Olden Time.' All in perfect preservation. Magnificent banquet-hall, with

great carved oak screen, gallery, moulded ceiling and pendants. Grand old oak staircase. Long corridors filled with old family portraits—dames and knights. Not one of the former beauties half so lovely as Lady Richborough, though. And for that matter, Sir Charles is better looking than any of his ancestors. What with portraits, carved chimney-pieces, tapestried chambers, and antiquated furniture, you'll find a great deal to your taste at Boxgrove, I can promise you."

"From what you say I make no doubt I should," replied Hilary. "You give me an excellent idea of the old place, and your description of Lady Richborough is quite captivating."

"Does no justice to the original, as you'll admit when you see her. She's a beauty—and no mistake. But come! we must be moving towards the house. The gong will soon sound for breakfast. I think my aunt will make her appearance. A very charming person—but I forget you've seen her."

"I have," replied Hilary, "and I quite agree with you. She *is* charming."

"Thinks herself still twenty-five—that's her only fault," replied Oswald, laughing. "Apropos of pictures! you'll see her portrait, by Grant, in the dining-room. Laud it to the skies, and you'll win her heart."

With this he offered his arm, and they walked at a very leisurely pace to the house.

Just as they reached the terrace, Mr. Radcliffe came *forth, without his hat*, looking very cheerful and hearty.

Shaking hands cordially with Hilary, he congratulated him upon his recovery.

"He's curious to know who and what you are," whispered Oswald. "Shall I enlighten him as to the artistic profession?"

"By all means," replied the young man.

Oswald then imparted all he knew to his uncle, who did not seem surprised to learn that Hilary was an artist.

"Glad to hear it," he cried. "You could have no better recommendation to me. A man of talent is always welcome at Hazlemere."

More might have been said, but the gong sounded, and they went in to breakfast.

XVI.

Breakfast.

THE dining-room, in which breakfast was served, was large and well-proportioned, being designed for hospitality on a grand scale; but Mr. Radcliffe, owing to his wife's delicate health, only gave small dinners, never exceeding ten or twelve. With its round table, massive sideboard, thick Turkey carpet, folding screens, portraits and pictures, the room had a very comfortable air. French windows opened upon the terrace, and a side window looked out upon the parterres and walls covered with magnolias, which we have previously described. Over the chimney-piece hung a full-length portrait of the lady of the house, with her then infantine daughter—the work of an eminent artist, since elevated to the chair of the Royal Academy. Other noticeable pictures graced the walls, the chief among them being a pony and a Scotch terrier of the Dandie Dinmont breed, by Sir Edwin, a marine piece by Stanfield, and the high altar in the church of the Holy Apostles at Rome, by Roberts.

SUCH was the ordinary appearance of the room; but this being an extraordinary occasion, it had quite a floral aspect, befitting the day. Flowers everywhere—on the chimney-piece, and on the corners of the *sideboard*. Choice plants from the greenhouse and

conservatory were placed on temporary stands. A beautifully arranged flower vase occupied the centre of the table; and the initials of the young May Queen, traced with great skill on the snow-white cover in flowers of various hues, produced a charming effect. The atmosphere was warm and odorous, Mrs. Radcliffe having ordered a fire, and enjoined that no window should be left open.

May and her mother were in the room when the gentlemen entered. For a wonder Mrs. Radcliffe had come down thus early, more, we think, from the desire to please Hilary, than from regard for her lovely daughter. May was occupied at the breakfast table, at which she always officiated. Her mother was standing by the fire, looking slight, delicate, graceful, carefully got up with an eye to effect, and holding an embroidered kerchief in her hand. Hilary's quick eye took in at a glance the decorations of the room, the persons within it, and the pictures. Oswald set up a shout, and fairly clapped his hands. Having first tenderly embraced his daughter and given her his blessing, the old gentleman began to look around, and expressed his satisfaction at the arrangements, though he secretly wished he could let a breath of air into the room.

Meanwhile, Hilary had advanced to Mrs. Radcliffe, by whom he was very graciously received, though she rallied him on his want of candour towards her on their first meeting.

"Why did you not tell me you are a painter, Mr.

St. Ives? What need of concealment? Artists are my delight. I am proud to number Sir Edwin and several others of note among my friends."

Hilary excused himself as he best could, adding that he was not worthy to be classed with the distinguished painters she had mentioned, being merely a tyro.

"Do not disparage yourself," said the lady, with one of her most captivating smiles. "Your sketch of my daughter proves you have consummate skill. I must put your power to a severer test."

"I shall never dare to try my feeble hand, after seeing the matchless performance," he replied, glancing at the portrait. "You have been fortunate in finding a painter capable of appreciating you and doing you justice. Ah! if I could ever hope to rival that."

"Why should you not?"

"Because it is perfection, and unapproachable. Its beauty drives me to despair."

"You have one requisite for success in your profession," remarked Mrs. Radcliffe, smiling. "You can flatter gracefully."

"You should see Sir William Newton's miniature of my aunt," interposed Oswald. "That's something like a portrait. It's an out-and-out better likeness than this."

"That I must take leave to deny, though I have not seen it," replied Hilary. "A miniature may be *exquisite*, but it will not bear a moment's comparison

with a finished oil-painting such as we have before us."

"I can take no part in this discussion as to the relative merits of the pictures," observed Mrs. Radcliffe, smiling. "But I am rather partial to the miniature, I must own."

"It is considered Sir William's chef-d'œuvre, and by very good judges," remarked Mr. Radcliffe.

"I must defer to the general opinion," said Hilary. "But——"

"You maintain your own," observed Mrs. Radcliffe. "Well, you shall see the miniature by-and-by, and then you can fairly decide."

"Meantime, I must beg you to bestow a glance on my pony and dog," cried May, joining the group near the fire-place. "Are they not charmingly painted?"

As may be supposed, Hilary was enchanted with the picture, which was really admirable, and was still extolling it, when Mr. Luff, the butler, who was almost as portly as his master, and about the same age, waddled into the room, followed by Boston, bearing a chased silver coffee-pot, which emitted a grateful odour, cutlets, broiled salmon-trout, and all the *et ceteras* requisite for a good breakfast.

Hereupon, the whole party sat down at table. Hilary was assigned a seat between the two ladies, and feeling now quite at ease, since full explanation had been given, he conversed naturally and agreeably. There was certainly a fascination in his manner, which both mother and daughter experienced in an almost

equal degree. Even Mr. Radcliffe was delighted with him. Oswald had a keen appetite that morning—in deed, he was a famous trencherman at all times—and devoted himself to the cold chicken and Montanches ham, with which Mr. Luff, who knew his tastes, supplied him, leaving the talking to be done by Hilary, and only now and then putting in a word. But he began to think the young man was getting on rather too well with his aunt and his fair cousin, and that it behoved him to put a stop to it, but he didn't see exactly how the thing was to be done at the moment. No such feelings influenced Mr. Radcliffe. Nothing pleased him better than to see his wife and daughter pleased. And they evidently were so. If the truth must be told, the worthy old gentleman, who was not insensible to the importance of rank, was secretly much disappointed that May could not make up her mind to accept Sir Charles Ilminster. He had talked the matter over with her quietly on the previous evening, and had dilated on the advantages of the alliance, which were palpable enough, as well as on Sir Charles's merits, which were equally palpable, but he could not induce her to alter her decision. All he could obtain was a promise that she would not give the baronet an absolute refusal. Just now, when they first met, he had taken her aside for a moment and questioned her, but her sentiments remained unchanged.

He felt half disposed to be angry, but as he gazed at her fair face, and saw how happy she seemed, the *feeling* quickly vanished, and he tried to reconcile

himself to his disappointment. He saw plainly enough that her charms had produced an effect upon Hilary; but that May would ever bestow a serious thought upon a poor artist, however handsome and agreeable he might be, never entered his head. So he ate his breakfast tranquilly, and joined in the conversation whenever opportunity offered.

May was of the same opinion as her father. Not conceiving it possible she could entertain a feeling stronger than that of common interest for a nameless artist, she did not think it necessary to be on her guard, or to adopt a distant manner towards him, which might at once have crushed his hopes, if he ventured to indulge any. Unconsciously, therefore, she encouraged him, so that the flame, already kindled in his bosom, began to burn more fiercely, and, before breakfast was over, he was desperately in love with her.

Mrs. Radcliffe, who had watched him narrowly, and was gifted with very quick powers of observation in such matters, quite understood the state of his feelings.

She also thought May was slightly touched; but on this point she did not feel quite sure.

Before she came down stairs, Mrs. Radcliffe had had a brief conversation with her daughter respecting Sir Charles, but had not—doubtless from the best motives—attempted to dissuade her from declining his offer.

Inquiring about the plans for the day, Oswald was

informed that nothing could be settled until after the arrival of grandpapa.

"We must wait at home for him, of course," remarked May.

"Besides, you will have visitors, in all probability," observed her mamma.

"Yes, I think you may expect Sir Charles and his sister at luncheon," said Oswald, innocently. "Her ladyship told me they meant to ride over this morning to offer their compliments to May."

"Very kind," said the young lady, glancing at mamma.

"I shall be very glad to see them," remarked Mrs. Radcliffe. "I hope we may prevail upon them to stay dinner."

"I don't think that at all likely, mamma," said May.

"At any rate I shall ask them," observed papa.

Breakfast, which had been somewhat profuse, was now nearly over. Already Mrs. Radcliffe had begun to complain of fatigue. Begging Hilary to excuse her, she rose with the intention of retiring to her boudoir. Oswald flew to open the door, when who should come in but Mr. Thornton—in his hat and great-coat, just as he had arrived.

He stood still for a moment or two, to give full effect to his appearance, chuckling inwardly at his daughter's well-feigned surprise, and at the exclamations of astonishment that rose from the breakfast-table.

He then burst into a loud laugh, and called out,

"Didn't expect to see me, eh? Grandpapa couldn't be absent on his darling May's birthday. Where is she?—where is my child? Let her gladden my eyes."

"Here I am, dearest grandpapa," cried May, rushing towards him, and flinging her arms round his neck. "Thank you so much for coming to see me to-day."

"I couldn't keep away, I tell you, though you didn't invite me," he rejoined, pressing his lips to her smooth brow. "Bless you, my love! Many, many happy returns of the day. I haven't forgotten you," he added, giving her the box of trinkets.

"Another birthday present!" exclaimed May.

"Only a few trifles. Look at them by-and-by."

He then advanced into the room, embraced his daughter, who professed to be charmed by his wholly unexpected visit, and shook hands very cordially with Mr. Radcliffe and Oswald. He did not pay much attention to Hilary, who had got up to examine the pictures, and whose back was towards him.

"Just in time," cried Mr. Radcliffe. "We haven't half done breakfast, and if we had we could begin again. Hot coffee in a minute."

"Let me help you off with your great-coat, sir," said Oswald.

"Stop a minute!" cried Mr. Thornton, assuming a mysterious air. "Fact is, I've brought a friend with me."

"Delighted to hear it," replied Mr. Radcliffe. "Bring him in at once. Has your friend breakfasted?"

"No, we left town early," replied Mr. Thornton. Becoming still more mysterious, he added to his daughter, "An old friend of yours, my dear—an old and valued friend—has come purposely to see you."

"An old friend of mine!" she exclaimed, struck by his manner, and having a strange presentiment of the truth. "Oh! good gracious, papa—how could you? Why not let me know beforehand? I can't be taken by surprise in this way. You know how frightfully nervous I am, and the sudden apparition of an old friend whom I didn't expect might kill me. Don't tell me who he is—don't. Bring him to my boudoir after you have had breakfast. By that time I shall be prepared."

"But my dear——"

Mrs. Radcliffe would not listen to a word more, but hurried away.

Not to the boudoir, however, but to Mrs. Sutton's room. She trembled lest she should find any one in the hall—but she did not. Where could he be?

The door of the housekeeper's room was closed, but voices could be heard within. Her presentiments were correct. It was he. She knew his voice. She would have taken flight instantly, if she had had the power to move. But her strength was gone, and she was obliged to lean against the wall for support.

XVII.

What passed in the Housekeeper's Room.

NOT many minutes before Mr. Thornton presented himself at the dining-room door, as previously related, he and Colonel Delacombe had arrived at Hazlemere. Determined to carry out his plan in his own way, the old gentleman would not allow the servants to give any intimation of their arrival; but directing Mr. Luff to look after the luggage, and pay the coachman who had driven them from the station, he begged the colonel to wait for him for a few moments, and left him.

Colonel Delacombe was standing near the door, finishing his cigar, and wondering within himself whether all would go off smoothly, when a livid face appeared before him. The expression of the face was so deadly and menacing, that a drill of apprehension shot through his frame.

Mrs. Sutton had witnessed the arrival of the two gentlemen from a back window that looked upon the yard, and though filled with rage and terror on beholding Colonel Delacombe, for whose appearance she was unable to account, she resolved at once to have an explanation with him.

The opportunity was offered her by Mr. Thornton. With wonderful self-command under the circumstances, she approached the unwelcome visitor, and begged him

to step into her room for a moment. Though he would have gladly avoided the interview just then, the colonel could not refuse, but, throwing away his cigar, followed her immediately.

Closing the door, she put no further constraint upon herself, but fixing a determined look upon him, demanded, in threatening tones:

"What brings you here? To come hither to molest me is an act of madness on your part, as you ought to feel. If there is to be war between us, I shall not shrink from it, and be sure you will not come off victorious. I will use all the weapons I possess against you, and I have many, without scruple."

The colonel, who was a very cool hand, did not seem alarmed, and she proceeded yet more fiercely.

"What has brought you here, I ask again? Do you wish to expose me? Take care. I am dangerous—more dangerous than you suspect. Utter a word, and I will retaliate. Mark what I say—retaliate. Certain papers have just fallen into my hands, which place you completely in my power. Now do you understand?"

"Poh! poh!" cried Colonel Delacombe. "This is mere raving, and only makes me doubt your sanity. You ask if I have come to expose you. Knowing nothing about you, what can I have to expose? You ask what has brought me here. I will tell you in a word. I have come at the special invitation of my worthy old friend, Mr. Thornton, simply for the pleasure of *renewing my acquaintance* with his daughter, Mrs. Radcliffe,

and with no intention whatever of troubling you. Indeed, I only accidentally learnt you were here. Having so far satisfied you, I must beg to put an end to this interview—entirely unsought on my part—unless you can be content to talk rationally and calmly. Recriminations are ridiculous. I have no accusation to bring against you. To the best of my knowledge, I never saw you before yesterday. I then fancied—mind, it was only fancy—that you resembled one whom I dearly loved in former years, *but whom I know to be dead*. I am sorry to see the likeness has wholly disappeared, and has given place to something totally different. I acknowledge my mistake, and apologise for it.”

“It is no mistake, Seymour,” she rejoined, in a more subdued tone, and with something even of sadness. “She whom you formerly professed to love still lives.”

“I know better,” he said, coldly. “She has been dead these twenty years.”

“I could easily convince you to the contrary. But there is no need, since you are fully aware of the fact.”

“Excuse me, madam,” said the colonel. “I don’t see why this discussion should be prolonged, or to what it can possibly lead. I have given you my positive assurance that I do not design to meddle with you, and you may depend upon it I will keep my word. Even if there were any secret between you and myself—and there is none—it would be my interest to keep it. You can, therefore, have nothing to apprehend from me. So far from desiring to molest you, if I can

tender you any service, I shall be delighted to do so, and you have only to command me."

Mrs. Sutton looked at him for a moment with irrepressible tenderness, and, in spite of her efforts, tears sprang to her eyes, but she checked her emotion.

"I am very sorry on all accounts that you have come here at this juncture," she said. "Your presence cannot fail to produce awkward complications, and may lead—in spite of all my care to prevent them—to untoward consequences."

"I will leave immediately, if I find I am in the way," he said.

"That would not mend matters," she rejoined. "Undoubtedly, you are in the way—very much in the way—but your immediate departure would provoke remark, and excite suspicion. Since you have come it is best you should stay. You owe me much. I will not reproach you. I will not threaten you more. I will not appeal to the past. But I implore you to compassionate me—to serve me."

"Since you adopt this tone, I will do anything you require," replied the colonel, attempting to take her hand, which she withdrew with a shudder.

"Promise me, then—promise me solemnly," she cried, "that, during your stay here, whatever you may learn, or whomsoever you meet, you will give no explanation that can in the remotest degree compromise me. Above all, promise that you will make no allusion to our past connexion."

"*Though* for the life of me I cannot imagine what

you allude to, I promise implicit secrecy on all points," said the colonel, lightly.

"There must be no trifling," said Mrs. Sutton. "My existence hangs upon your caution. Swear that you will not breathe a word."

"I swear it," replied the colonel. "Have you anything more to say to me? Any further directions to give?"

"None. Be cautious. Do not betray me or yourself. Recollect that I am merely the housekeeper—nothing more. You must not stay longer here. Mr. Thornton will be looking for you. I will go with you to the hall."

As they issued forth they saw a retreating figure at the end of the passage.

"Heavens!" ejaculated the housekeeper, "there is Mrs. Radcliffe. Can she have been here and overheard us?"

"Diable! I hope not," replied the colonel. "That would be a bad beginning."

When they reached the entrance hall, Mrs. Radcliffe had disappeared.

She had flown up-stairs to her boudoir with a precipitancy that perfectly electrified Annette, who chanced to witness the performance.

XVIII.

A second Breakfast.

MRS. SUTTON was still with the colonel when the dining-room door opened and Mr. Thornton came forth with Mr. Radcliffe. The latter shook hands very heartily with his unexpected visitor, welcomed him to Hazlemere, and told him how delighted his wife would be to see him. Orders were then given to Mrs. Sutton, who had resumed her customary rôle, to prepare a room for the colonel. Mr. Thornton having his own room, there was no occasion to say anything about that. Further orders were given to the butler to serve a second breakfast as quickly as possible; and these matters being arranged, Mr. Radcliffe conducted the colonel to the dining-room, and introduced him to May.

No one else was in the room at the time. The windows had been thrown open by Mr. Radcliffe, and Oswald and Hilary had stepped out into the garden.

May's charms surpassed any notions that the colonel had formed of them. She was struck by his distinguished appearance and manner, but yet more struck by a certain resemblance which she fancied she detected between him and Hilary. It could scarcely be fancy, for the resemblance seemed to increase as *she saw more of him.*

After making all the complimentary speeches proper to the occasion, admiring the floral decorations of the room and the table, the colonel inquired, with an expression of great interest, about mamma, and learnt that she had just retired to her boudoir, but would be delighted to see him after breakfast. The portrait over the chimney-piece next invited his attention, and he was expatiating with rapture upon its beauty, and exclaiming, "Yes, there she is, just as I beheld her last," when his rhapsodies were checked by a summons to the breakfast-table from Mr. Thornton.

"Sit down, colonel, pray sit down!" cried the old gentleman. "I'm sure you must be hungry. I am desperately so. A cup of coffee if you please, May."

"Here it comes, grandpapa," she rejoined, as a fresh supply of hot coffee, broils, tea-cakes, and toast was brought in by the butler.

Meantime, Mr. Radcliffe had been busy at the side-board carving cold fowl, ham, and tongue, so that his guests had wherewithal to make a good breakfast. The colonel differed from Oswald. While satisfying his appetite, he contrived to converse most agreeably, and May was never more entertained than by his lively discourse.

They were still at the breakfast-table when the two young men, who were smoking their cigars on the terrace, passed rather slowly in front of the window.

"Who the deuce have you got there, May?" demanded Mr. Thornton, looking after them.

"Oswald's companion is Mr. Hilary St. Ives, grandpapa," she replied.

"And who may Mr. St. Ives be?—what is he?" asked the old gentleman.

"An artist," returned May.

"An artist!" echoed Mr. Thornton, with a strong expression of contempt. "Then he has no business here."

"Why not, dear grandpapa?" she rejoined. "Besides, Mr. St. Ives was not invited."

And she then proceeded to explain how the young man chanced to be at the house. Mr. Thornton knew all about it, as we are aware; but he feigned ignorance, and when May had finished her recital, signified his disapproval, and told Mr. Radcliffe plainly he had been far too kind.

"Nay, indeed, I must defend papa, if a kind action can require defence," cried May. "It would have been quite inconsistent with his character to act otherwise. If he had done so, I should not love him half as well as I do."

"Humph!" exclaimed the old gentleman. "You mean to insinuate, you pert little minx, that grandpapa has not the common feelings of humanity, eh? May be not. His compassion certainly does not proceed to this extent. Possibly, he might bring a wounded man home with him—though I think he would have taken him to an inn—but when the fellow had got well enough to walk about and smoke a cigar, he would *have given him* immediate notice to quit."

"All depends upon the person, dear grandpapa," rejoined May. "Mr. St. Ives is very clever, and very gentlemanlike, and when you see him, you won't wonder that mamma has invited him to remain a few days and recruit. He has not quite recovered yet."

"He wouldn't be well now, if Sutton hadn't nursed him so carefully," observed Mr. Radcliffe. "She has done more for him than the doctor."

"I dare say," rejoined the old gentleman. "But you know nothing about the young man, except that he's an artist, and I don't approve of his remaining in the house. I shall talk to your wife about him presently."

"You may spare yourself the trouble, sir. You won't produce much effect," laughed Mr. Radcliffe.

"From the glimpse I caught of him just now, the young man appears to be good-looking and gentlemanlike," observed the colonel.

"Remarkably so," said Mr. Radcliffe.

"Let us go and have a look at him," cried the old gentleman, rising. "Have you finished breakfast, colonel?"

"Quite," replied the other.

"I am sure *you* will be pleased with the young man, colonel," remarked Mr. Radcliffe.

"Why so, sir?"

"Well, I have a reason. But see him first, and then I'll tell it you."

"Since he has won the good opinion of Mrs. Radcliffe and your daughter, I am sure to be pleased with him," said the colonel.

The whole party then went out upon the terrace. Colonel Delacombe was enchanted with the prospect offered to his view. While he was indulging in the raptures naturally called forth by such a charming scene, Mr. Radcliffe looked about for the young men. They had quitted the terrace. Presently Oswald made his appearance, but he was alone.

"What have you done with St. Ives?" inquired his uncle.

"Left him in the summer-house sketching," replied the young man.

Oswald was then presented in due form to Colonel Delacombe, who expressed particular pleasure on making his acquaintance. As the young man drew back, he remarked in a whisper to his uncle,

"Very odd! Don't you perceive the likeness?"

"Likeness to whom?" said his uncle, with a droll look.

"Why to St. Ives, of course. Don't you perceive it? Surprising!"

"Hush! not a word of that just now. I want to see them together."

"Shall I bring St. Ives here?" asked Oswald.

"No; we'll go to the summer-house."

The plan, however, was defeated by Mrs. Sutton, who brought her mistress's compliments to Colonel Delacombe. Mrs. Radcliffe did not feel quite strong enough to come down-stairs, having rather over exerted *herself* that morning, but would be delighted to see the

colonel if he would take the trouble to step up to her boudoir.

"My mistress is all impatience to see you, sir," added the housekeeper.

Of course the colonel was happy to obey the summons, and bowing his excuses to May, followed the housekeeper, who waited to conduct him to her mistress.

This interposition destroyed Mr. Radcliffe's anticipated joke—at all events postponed it. So he took Mr. Thornton to the summer-house.

Not for a moment did Mrs. Sutton forget her part. The servants were moving about, and she knew their eyes were upon her. Her demeanour to the colonel as they went up-stairs was most respectful. She told him a room had been prepared for him, and that Boston, the valet, would attend upon him.

But just before they reached the boudoir, she said, in a low tone,

"Reassure yourself. She was there as we supposed. But she heard nothing."

XIX.

How they met after long Years.

NOT for the universe would Mrs. Radcliffe have had the meeting with her old lover take place in the presence of any other person than the housekeeper, to whom she had confided her heart's secret.

"Oh! he is come, Sutton!" she cried. "Seymour is come! What am I to do?"

Scarcely able to repress her own feelings of aversion and scorn, the housekeeper replied, that whatever she might feel, she owed it to her husband and her daughter to keep calm. There must be no outward manifestation of emotion—no fainting—no hysterics—no scene.

"There shall be nothing of the kind, I promise you, Sutton."

"Treat him merely as an old friend, whom you are rejoiced to see again. That is what you ought to do—*must* do."

"I mean to do so. There shall be no display of emotion. But I must see him alone. I dread the first meeting. That over, I shall be myself."

The housekeeper objected to this very strongly, but suffered herself to be overcome, perceiving, probably, that Mrs. Radcliffe would have her own way.

She was occupied for the next half hour in the ungrateful, to her almost revolting, task of preparing her

mistress for the interview. Mrs. Radcliffe made many alterations in her toilette, and was scarcely satisfied in the end.

"How would he like to see me, do you think, Sutton?" she asked, with the anxiety of a girl. "Will this do?"

The housekeeper muttered a reply, in which contempt was thinly veiled.

"Now you can bring him to me, Sutton," she cried. "Stay! we have forgotten one thing—his miniature!"

"What of it?" asked the housekeeper, sharply.

"Restore it to its place. I would have him notice it."

Mrs. Sutton reluctantly complied, and the miniature was hung up again.

"Now do have pity upon me, there's a dear creature, and bring him to me directly," entreated Mrs. Radcliffe. "No one else, mind."

"Pity!" ejaculated the housekeeper, as she left the boudoir, and could give vent to her feelings. "Miserable woman, expect no pity from me. When the time comes, I will have payment in full."

As soon as she was alone, Mrs. Radcliffe surveyed herself in her mirror, with the eye of an experienced coquette, glancing at her coiffure, and examining the minutest details of her dress. A trifle of rouge being given to her cheek, she thought she would do. She then seated herself in her fauteuil in the most graceful attitude she could assume. A flutter of excitement

agitated her breast, as she heard his footsteps in the passage.

The door opened. Mrs. Sutton ushered in the colonel, and immediately retired, though not without casting a bitter and vindictive look at her mistress.

Mrs. Radcliffe did not rise. With an exclamation of pleasure, she extended her hand towards him.

He took it, and pressed the delicate fingers to his lips.

A brief interval ensued, during which both were silent. In thought they had flown back to former days. Both were young again. He still retained her hand, and the thin fingers trembled in his grasp. She became perceptibly agitated, and her lips quivered, but, determined not to give way, she motioned him to take a seat opposite her, and he complied.

"This is indeed a pleasure to me, Seymour," she said, with a tenderness of expression which she could not control. "I never expected to behold you again."

"And I never expected—never intended to return to my native country," he replied, in much the same tone. "But circumstances have brought me back, and my first visit is to you, Esther."

She smiled faintly.

"I am truly glad to see you. Accept my congratulations upon your brilliant achievements in India, and upon the honours you have won. All your friends must feel proud of you. I do."

"If you are proud of me, Esther, I am content. I

care more for your esteem than that of any other. I have won distinction, but I am not happy."

"You ought to be happy, Seymour."

"You know well why I am not, Esther. *You* are happy, I presume. You have a charming daughter—a most lovely girl—your image. The sight of her almost unmanned me."

"May is far lovelier than I ever was, Seymour. I hope you like Mr. Radcliffe?"

"I appreciate his good qualities and his bonhomie; but I cannot forgive him for robbing me——"

"No more of this, Seymour. Not a word against my husband, or you forfeit my friendship entirely."

"You quite mistake me. I have not the slightest idea of disparaging him. I am sure Mr. Radcliffe is a pattern husband. Well, you see I have kept my word. I have returned from India as I went out—a bachelor. I deserve some praise, for I might have made more than one capital match."

"I cannot doubt it, Seymour," she rejoined. "But, pardon me—you say bachelor—ought you not rather to describe yourself as a widower?"

"A widower!" he exclaimed, staring at her. "What mean you, Esther?"

Mrs. Radcliffe made no reply, but looked down and played with her eye-glass.

The colonel rose from his seat and approached her.

"There is only one person on earth whom I would have married, and she jilted me," he said, earnestly.

"There you wrong her," replied the lady. "She did not jilt you, Seymour, and you know it. She was forced to give you up. Pray do not recal that unhappy time."

"I would not give you an instant's pain if I could help it, Esther. Far less do I desire to open long-closed wounds. But you appear to have got a notion in your head which it is necessary I should remove."

"Really, Seymour, I meant nothing. It was merely a foolish fancy of my own. Forgive me for making the observation. I see it has disturbed you."

"From any other lips than yours the remark would have been perfectly indifferent to me, and I should have laughed at it. But I cannot allow you to labour under the slightest misapprehension. Some mischief-maker must have hinted this to you. By-the-by," he added, in a careless tone, and as if changing the subject, "you have got a very superior sort of person as housekeeper."

"He suspects Sutton, I perceive," thought Mrs. Radcliffe. "I am not surprised you should be struck with her. Most people are so. Mrs. Sutton has lived with me nineteen years—ever since May was born, in fact—and is invaluable to me."

"Who is she?" asked the colonel. "She looks like a lady."

"I know little of her previous history, except that she was married very young to a worthless man, who deserted her, but fortunately died. I have not questioned her much about her husband, as you may sup-

pose, for the subject is extremely painful to her. Apparently, she has no ties, for I never hear her speak of her relations. She has devoted herself exclusively to me, and I have the greatest confidence in her."

"I am sure your confidence is not misplaced. You are most fortunate in possessing such a treasure."

"She is a treasure, and I should be sorry to lose her. She might marry very well, if she chose. Mr. Malham, the surgeon—a most respectable man, and very well to do—has spoken to me about her, but she won't listen to him for a moment. She has had too bitter an experience of wedded life to run a second risk."

"The housekeeper is mistress here, that I can see," thought the colonel. "I am glad on your account, though sorry for poor Malham, that Mrs. Sutton has so decided," he added, aloud. "What a charming boudoir you have got! An Indian life would suit you, Esther. You would be idolised at Calcutta or Bombay. Why not go back with me when I return—and I haven't got long leave?—taking Mr. Radcliffe and May with you, of course."

"How can you make such an absurd proposition?" she exclaimed. But she did not seem displeased, and added, with a half sigh, "I do think my delicate health might be improved by a few years spent in a climate like that of India."

"Not a doubt of it. Apropos of India, I see you have got my old Bengal tiger here. The magnificent brute who once owned that skin might have made a

meal of me. My first shot only wounded him. He sprang upon my elephant, who had enough to do to bear his weight, killed my mahout, and in another instant would have reached my howdah, if I had not despatched him by a ball through the brain. I never shall forget the ferocious aspect of the beast as I fired. It was an awful moment."

"I have your letter describing the terrific encounter, Seymour. In fact, I have all your letters."

The colonel did not seem much gratified by the information. But he made no remark.

"I keep them in that casket," pursued the lady. "Look round. Do you notice anything over the chimney-piece? Any souvenir of former days?"

"Ah! the miniature I gave you. That was taken in my beaux jours. I had not a scarred cheek and a grey moustache then."

"The scar improves you, Seymour, and so does the grey moustache."

He then fell into raptures with the other miniature, and was still admiring it when the door opened, and Mr. Radcliffe came in.

"Sorry to interrupt your tête-à-tête," he remarked, in an apologetic tone. "But you will excuse me I am sure, my love."

"We have no more secrets to discuss," replied the lady.

"In that case I need not hesitate. Mr. St. Ives is without," he added, with a significant glance at his wife. "Have I your permission to bring him in."

Charmed by the idea of witnessing the meeting, Mrs. Radcliffe graciously assented.

"Come in!" cried Mr. Radcliffe.

Thereupon Hilary entered the boudoir, followed by Mr. Thornton, who was obliged to hold a handkerchief to his mouth to stifle his merriment.

Mr. Radcliffe went through his part very well, though he had to check a strong tendency to laughter.

"Allow me, colonel, to present to you our young artist, Mr. Hilary St. Ives," he said, leading the young man forward.

Colonel Delacombe moved politely towards him, but suddenly stopped and stared at Hilary, who looked quite as much astonished as himself.

Thus brought face to face, the resemblance between them was seen to be very striking, allowing of course, for difference of age. Even their height corresponded as nearly as might be, though the colonel was a trifle the taller of the two. Naturally, the advantages of youth were on Hilary's side, and the palm of good looks must have been assigned to him, but he wanted the refinement of manner and proud military bearing that lent so much distinction to the bronzed and scarred soldier.

Half-suppressed laughter reached the colonel's ears, warning him that he was the object of a practical joke. He glanced at Mr. Radcliffe, as much as to say, "I now understand why the young fellow was brought here." He then addressed Hilary.

"Glad to know you, Mr. St. Ives. Your features appear familiar to me."

"I should think they must be," muttered Mr. Thornton; "uncommonly familiar."

"I was about to make the same remark, colonel," said Hilary. "If it were not presumption on my part, I would venture to observe——"

"That you have discovered a likeness," supplied Mr. Radcliffe, laughing. "So have we all."

"Never saw such a likeness in all my born days!" exclaimed Mr. Thornton, indulging in a roar. "Excuse me, colonel—I can't help it—ha! ha!"

"I won't affect to misunderstand what you mean," said the colonel, joining in the laugh. "You pay me a much greater compliment than you do Mr. St. Ives."

"I should be proud to be thought like you, colonel," said Hilary.

"Then make yourself easy on that score, young man," remarked Mr. Thornton.

Mrs. Radcliffe, who had looked on through her eye-glass, much amused by the scene, added her testimony to that of her father.

"We have provided you with a son, colonel," said Mr. Thornton, in a loud whisper.

"A son!" exclaimed the other. "My good sir, I wish I had such a son as Mr. St. Ives. But you know very well I have never married."

While making the assertion, he cast a glance at *Mrs. Radcliffe*, and saw that she was smiling.

"Excuse me, colonel," said Hilary. "May I venture to ask if you chance to know Mr. Courtenay of Exeter?—or have had any correspondence with him?"

"Courtenay! I know lots of Courtenays. Major Courtenay, of the 2nd Foot, is my bosom friend; and Captain Chichester Courtenay, of the 21st, is another great friend. But they are both in India—one at Bombay, the other at Madras. I have no acquaintance with Mr. Courtenay of Exeter, nor have I ever corresponded with him. Does your friend belong to the Devon family?"

Hilary shook his head, abashed.

Before any further questions could be put, an interruption was offered by May, who came to inform her mother that Lady Richborough and Sir Charles had just arrived.

"Indeed!" exclaimed Mrs. Radcliffe. "I didn't expect them so soon. Well, go at once with your papa to receive them. I will come down as soon as I can. You will like Sir Charles," she added to Colonel Delacombe.

"I'm sure of it, he rejoined. "I've heard of him. He was in the —th Lancers."

"I will say nothing about his sister, Lady Richborough, except that you are certain to fall in love with her. Go down and see her. Mr. Radcliffe will introduce you."

"Yes, come along," cried that gentleman. "You'll find her ladyship a most charming person."

"I must beg to be introduced at the same time," said Mr. Thornton, following them.

Thus Mrs. Radcliffe was left alone with Hilary. What passed between them will be learnt anon.

END OF THE FIRST BOOK.

BOOK II.

MYRTILLA.

I.

A Lecture from Grandpapa.

Not every woman who can move about gracefully in a riding-habit. Lady Richborough understood the art to perfection, and never looked better, or seemed more at ease than when attired *en Amazone*. The costume was exactly adapted to her incomparable figure. And how becoming was the hat surmounting the chignon in which her rich black tresses were braided.

While pacing to and fro on the lawn, chatting merrily with Oswald, with the skirts of her habit under her arm, and a little whip in her hand, her charming ladyship contrived to indulge her companion with a glimpse of a foot worthy of Cinderella, clad in the daintiest boot imaginable.

Sir Charles Ilminster was likewise upon the lawn, sauntering about by himself. He had by no means the confident air of a hopeful suitor. On the contrary, he looked thoughtful, and cast many an anxious glance towards the house, and when at last the object of his affections came forth, a tremor passed through his frame.

The joyous shout raised by Lady Richborough on sight of May, was blithely responded to by the fair young damsel. In another moment they had met, and embraced. The meeting was witnessed by Colonel

Delacombe and Mr. Thornton, who had lingered behind on the terrace, and very much delighted they both were with the spectacle.

"Deuced fine woman, Lady Richborough!" exclaimed the colonel. "Never saw a finer figure in my life."

"Magnificent!" cried the old gentleman.

Mr. Radcliffe followed his daughter as quickly as he could, and cordially greeted Sir Charles. But it did not fare so well with the baronet, as it had done with his sister. When he advanced to pay his devoirs to May, he was coldly received—so much so as to attract the attention of the spectators on the terrace. Not being in the secret, the colonel attached little importance to the circumstance, but Mr. Thornton was greatly put out by it.

"Zounds!" he mentally ejaculated. "I suspect the little hussy means to refuse him. Mustn't be. Height of folly to throw away such a chance."

He then proposed to the colonel that they should join the party on the lawn, and proceeding thither, they were presented in due form to Lady Richborough and Sir Charles. Her ladyship's charms lost nothing by nearer inspection—rather gained. If the colonel was charmed with her, she was not less struck by his distinguished appearance and manner. But she had too much tact to neglect Mr. Thornton, and quite captivated the old gentleman by the civil things she said to him. How could he resist such honeyed words *from lips so rosy?*

Colonel Delacombe got on very well with Sir Charles. Habitually, as we have remarked, the baronet was reserved and haughty, but he was prepossessed by the colonel's manner, which was unquestionably fascinating, and, besides, he knew all about him. So they were speedily on very friendly terms. Sir Charles had many friends in India, with most of whom Colonel Delacombe was acquainted, and could give him tidings of them. So well pleased was the baronet with his new acquaintance, that before they had been long together, he told him he should be delighted to see him at Boxgrove.

Overhearing the invitation, Lady Richborough warmly seconded it.

"I am sure you will be pleased with the old place," she said, with a look that was quite irresistible.

The colonel felt sure he should, and added that the invitation was a great deal too tempting to be refused.

Meantime, Mr. Thornton, who was resolved to have a word with his grand-daughter before any mischief was done, beckoned to her to follow him, and led her away from the company.

As soon as they were out of earshot, the old gentleman began without preamble.

"Your papa has intimated to me that you mean to refuse Sir Charles Ilminster. Now, my dear child, I tell you plainly you must do nothing of the sort. There cannot be two opinions as to the eligibility of Sir Charles. He is quite as good a match as you can

ever expect to make. Your union with him will place you in an excellent social position, and will be satisfactory to us all, while it must be conducive to your own happiness.

"Don't interrupt me, I beg. I won't listen to any observations. I know the silly arguments you are about to employ. 'You can't make up your mind'—'you don't care for him,' and so forth. Stuff and nonsense! You cannot fail to like Sir Charles; and as to making up your mind, since you are incapable of deciding for yourself, we must decide for you."

"But I have decided, dear grandpapa—quite decided."

"Not in the right way. You have decided to refuse Sir Charles. I won't allow you to commit such folly."

"Really, grandpapa, you are very unreasonable. I have no desire to marry just at present."

"Humph! I know better. Every girl of nineteen wishes to be married, whatever she may aver to the contrary. But even if you do desire to remain single a little longer, it is your bounden duty to accede to the wishes of your family. Nothing, I repeat, can be more satisfactory to us than the proposed alliance; and I, for one, shall be wofully disappointed if it does not take place. Your papa and mamma have not spoken to you as strongly as they ought to have done. They have not put the matter in the right light. They are too indulgent by half, and I have told them so. You *appear* to entertain most erroneous notions in regard

to matrimonial arrangements. A girl has no voice in them—or ought to have none. She must take the man chosen for her, whether she likes him or not. Do you mark that?"

"If you did not speak so seriously, grandpapa, I should think you were jesting."

"Parents expect implicit obedience to their will," pursued the old gentleman. "A girl's inclinations are rarely, if ever, consulted. Still more rarely is there any opposition on her part, because she knows that the best has been done for her. All important marriages are arranged on this plan. Mamma settles them. They may be styled 'Marriages of convenience.' What of that? They are far better than foolish love-matches that always end unhappily. Now, my dear child, I trust it won't be necessary for me to say more to ensure obedience to my injunctions. Put aside all nonsensical feeling, and accept Sir Charles."

"Anything in reason to please you, dear grandpapa," she rejoined. "But not this."

"You must—you *shall* accept him!" he cried, exasperated by her refusal.

The old gentleman had grown so terribly red in the face, that May feared he would have a fit of apoplexy, and it was a great relief to her when Lady Richborough and Oswald were seen approaching.

Delighted to escape from a further lecture, she hastened to meet her ladyship.

"The gentlemen are gone to look at the plants in the greenhouses," observed Lady Richborough. "But

I declined to accompany them, for I want to have a little talk with you, May. How excessively hot it is!"

"Suppose we sit down for a few minutes in the summer-house?" said May. "You will find it cool there."

"A delightful suggestion. You will know where to find us if we are wanted," she remarked, with an arch look at Oswald.

"Mind what I have said to you, May," cried Mr. Thornton, as the two ladies tripped off.

"What has grandpapa been saying to you, my love?" inquired her ladyship.

"Giving me a lecture," replied the other. "He is a very positive old gentleman, and likes his own way."

"But very fond of you, I'm sure, so you ought to let him have it," observed Lady Richborough, who suspected the truth.

"Harkee, Oswald," cried Mr. Thornton to his grandson; "I have a question to ask you, and I expect a straightforward answer. Have you proposed to your fair cousin?"

Oswald stammered out something, but could not deny the soft impeachment.

"And been rejected, eh?"

Impossible to offer a contradiction.

"I thought as much. Your poor mother persuaded herself that the affair was in excellent train, and would be settled as soon as I made my appearance, but she seems to have been out in her calculations, or you

have misled her. Never mind, my boy, never mind. You must look elsewhere for a wife. And you needn't look far," he observed, with a knowing wink—"not farther than Boxgrove."

"No chance there, sir," replied Oswald. "Lady Richborough is a monstrous fine woman, but above my mark."

"Poh! poh! you don't know whether you've a chance or not till you try. Were I in your place I wouldn't hesitate."

"But there's a difficulty to get over, sir, of which you may not be aware. Her ladyship forfeits her jointure if she marries again."

"S'death! that is awkward—confoundedly awkward. I promised your mother I would do something handsome for you on your marriage, and so I will. But her highflying ladyship couldn't live on a paltry pittance of a thousand a year."

"I fear not, sir. Therefore I must give up all idea of such a match. Besides, to confess the truth, I can't get May out of my head."

"Think no more about her, I tell you. We have other designs for May. A little flirtation with her ladyship—if it comes to nothing—will cure you of your foolish passion. By-the-by, you haven't told me *why* May refused you. I thought she liked you, and so did your mother. Has she any other attachment?"

"None that I'm aware of, sir. I was fool enough to believe she liked me. She seems to have a sort of fancy for that young artist who has got into the house."

II.

In the Summer-house.

"WELL, my love," cried Lady Richborough, laying down her whip, and taking off her hat, as they entered the summer-house, "I have a great deal to say to you, but I scarcely know where to begin. However, I must dash into the thick of it, or I shall never get on. Of course you have seen Sir Charles's letter, but I can assure you it gives a very inadequate idea of the dear boy's feelings, for he is desperately smitten. I confess I don't approve of such a formal mode of proceeding. An offer comes best from a man's own lips, for then it springs straight from the heart, and there can be no mistake about it—but Charlie would have his own way. Ah! if I were to repeat all the rapturous things he has uttered about you, I should tire your patience as much as he has tired mine. Your name has been coupled with every endearing epithet in the language. Sixty times in the hour is it pronounced—that is, once in every minute."

"You are laughing at me," observed May.

"No such thing. I am trying to give you an idea of the dear boy's condition. I have known many a man who has been suffering from heart complaint, but I never knew a worse case than Charlie's. You must

take pity on him, or you will be answerable for the fatal consequences certain to ensue."

"I should be sorry to be the cause of Sir Charles's death," replied May, smiling. "But I have no apprehension of any such result."

"Neither have I," rejoined her ladyship, "Because I feel sure you will compassionate him. Come, now we are alone, confess that you do love him—a very little bit. I see you do—though you won't answer. The dear boy deserves your love, for though he is my brother, I will say that a better fellow does not exist. If he has a fault I have never been able to discover it. He is the most refined, sensitive creature possible. A woman must be an angel to come up to his ideal."

"But I am not an angel, dear Lady Richborough," observed May, laughing.

"You are in Charlie's eyes," rejoined her ladyship. "But call me Myrtila—just as I call you May—for I now regard you as a sister. I must take some credit to myself for making the dear boy sensible of your merits. A hundred to one if he would have observed you, if I had not pointed you out, and given him my opinion about you. But on the very first interview those bright eyes did their business. Are you not vain of your conquest? You ought to be."

"Dearest Lady Richborough——"

"Myrtila, my love, if you please."

"Well, dearest Myrtila, I cannot allow you to go

on in this strain. I need not say how much flattered I feel by Sir Charles's offer, but——"

"You don't mean to say you have the slightest idea of refusing him?" cried her ladyship, in astonishment. "Impossible! I have a better idea of your judgment."

"I really cannot make up my mind," said May, blushing and greatly embarrassed.

"Oh! if you're only undecided I don't care," cried Lady Richborough, laughing. "I really didn't expect to be called upon to plead the dear boy's suit, because I thought the advantages of the offer would be obvious."

"I have the highest opinion of Sir Charles in every respect," said May. "But I cannot give him my heart."

"Have you given it to any one else?" demanded her ladyship.

"No," replied May, firmly.

"Then you may safely accept him. Love will come hereafter."

"But would it be fair to Sir Charles to act thus?"

Lady Richborough was rather puzzled by the question, but she answered promptly,

"Yes, I do not think any man has a right to expect more. Sir Charles's character must command your respect—his devotion cannot fail to win your love. I counsel you to accept him."

At this critical juncture, and as if he had been

expressly summoned, Sir Charles himself stood before them.

Smiling at her brother, Lady Richborough immediately arose, took up her hat and whip, and prepared to depart.

"Do not leave me, Myrtilla, I entreat," whispered May.

"Nay, my love, you must listen to the dear boy. A word from you will make him supremely happy. All's right," she whispered to Sir Charles, as she passed out. "Go in and win!"

III.

Mrs. Radcliffe gives Hilary Advice.

Now to return to the boudoir.

After begging Hilary to be seated, Mrs. Radcliffe observed,

"I think I can guess what is passing in your breast, Mr. St. Ives. You fancy you have discovered some solution to the mystery of your birth. I should be sorry to excite hopes that may never be realised—at the same time I cannot altogether discourage you. I will frankly own that the interest I felt in you at first was caused by the remarkable likeness you bear to Colonel Delacombe. There is a miniature of the colonel—taken when young. It might pass for your portrait."

"Astonishing!" exclaimed Hilary, gazing at the miniature. "I am fairly bewildered."

"I am a good deal perplexed myself," pursued Mrs. Radcliffe; "but one thing seems tolerably clear. Although the colonel feigned surprise on seeing you just now, I am pretty certain he knew you were here. I will tell you why I think so. This morning, I understand, you have received five hundred pounds from an unknown friend?"

"Very true."

"You have also received a chest containing a large

supply of wearing apparel and other things. Who could have sent the money and the chest?"

"No one but Colonel Delacombe!" exclaimed Hilary, eagerly.

"The colonel has only just returned from India," said Mrs. Radcliffe. "His first inquiries have evidently been about you. Having ascertained that you are here—though how he obtained the information I cannot explain—his immediate impulse was to send you assistance. His next was to run down and see you, which he persuaded himself he could do with safety. But the likeness between you—of which I suppose he was ignorant—has betrayed him."

"You have divined it all," cried Hilary.

Mrs. Radcliffe smiled at this tribute to her perspicacity.

"Of course he pretends that his visit is paid to me, but I know better," she said. "I am not to be duped by such a shallow artifice. He has come to see *you*, and satisfy himself, by personal inspection, what you are like. That is his object, I am convinced."

"I am lost in wonder at your penetration, madam," exclaimed Hilary. "Nothing seems to have escaped you."

"Another point of the last importance has yet to be mentioned," pursued Mrs. Radcliffe. "The arms engraved upon the signet-ring which you wear are the colonel's."

"Great heavens! is it possible? I have always been told that this ring was my father's?"

Mrs. Radcliffe smiled and nodded her head.

"I must beg you to entrust that ring to me for a time, for reasons which I will presently explain. It will be perfectly safe with me, I can assure you."

He gave it to her at once, and she locked it up in a drawer of the table.

"I do not wish the colonel to see it at present," she said; "and he could not fail to do so, if you continue to wear it. And now I must give you a few hints as to the course I think you ought to pursue. We will suppose our notions to be correct. Clearly, the first thing you have to do is to ingratiate yourself with the colonel. To succeed in this object will require care on your part. Do not seem too curious. Do not annoy him with any more questions. Evidently, as I have explained, he came here to reconnoitre. Let him take his own time, and proceed in his own way. Do not presume in the slightest degree on the discovery which you believe you have made. Do not allude to the likeness that seems to proclaim your parentage. By proper management, you may perhaps in the end induce him to acknowledge you. But this desirable consummation can only be brought about by prudence and caution. Like every one else, the colonel has his peculiarities, and in order to win his favour they must be studied."

"I hope to make him proud to acknowledge me," cried Hilary.

"Precisely what I would have you do, and I therefore urge you not to precipitate matters."

"I see the policy of the course you suggest, madam," said Hilary, with a look of inexpressible gratitude, "and will strive to follow it most carefully."

"I will give you all the aid I can," said Mrs. Radcliffe. "And now another word of caution. You will be surprised when I counsel you not to take Mrs. Sutton into your confidence. She is the best creature living, and I have every faith in her. But from some cause or other—I know not what—she has conceived a strong dislike to Colonel Delacombe, and may thwart your plans."

"I will not neglect your counsel, madam," said the young man. "But I could have trusted Mrs. Sutton with my life."

"Do not trust her now."

After a little pause she said:

"That you may fully comprehend the almost maternal interest I take in you, I must let you into a secret. Seymour Delacombe—I mean the colonel, of course—was my first love. I was engaged to him; but the engagement was broken off, and I was married to Mr. Radcliffe. Now you will understand what strange emotions were roused in my breast when I beheld one who so strongly resembled Seymour. Yes," she continued, carried away by excitement, and almost heedless what she said, "I thought what might have been, had fate permitted, and for the moment looked upon you as a son!"

Hilary started to his feet, doubting whether he had heard aright.

But another person—the very last who ought to have done so—heard the words. This was the lady's husband, who chanced to enter the boudoir at the moment.

However, we hasten to say that he attached very little importance at the time to the expressions, though he afterwards recalled them.

IV.

The Scheme Frustrated.

SEEING he was in the way, and a good deal confused, Hilary prepared to quit the room. Just as he was going out, Mrs. Radcliffe told him she would come down stairs presently, and introduce him to Sir Charles and his sister.

"My dear," said Mr. Radcliffe, as soon as they were alone, "you have promised more than you are likely to perform."

"Why so?" she inquired.

"I do not think it would be agreeable to Colonel Delacombe that this young man should be introduced to our friends. In fact, as things have turned out, it is rather unlucky that he happens to be here at this juncture; and I think the best plan will be to get rid of him—civilly, of course—as soon as we can."

"The thing is impossible, my dear," said his wife; "I have asked him to stay."

"Yes, but we must make some excuse. I see no harm in the young fellow—none whatever—and am quite willing that he should remain—indeed, I am sorry to send him away—but to tell you the truth, your father objects very strongly to him."

Mr. Radcliffe thought this argument would be unanswerable, but he was mistaken.

"Neither to please the colonel, nor to please papa, nor to please you, sir, can I allow Mr. St. Ives to go," said the lady, decidedly.

"I wish you could induce him to keep his own room then," groaned Mr. Radcliffe. "At any rate, let me beg of you not to introduce him to Lady Richborough and Sir Charles, or you will place me in a very awkward position."

"I cannot see why you should be uneasy," remarked the lady. "Mr. St. Ives is very gentlemanlike, and our friends will understand that he is an artist."

"But he will make the colonel look ridiculous, my dear. Can you understand that?"

"No, I confess I don't see it," said the lady.

Very opportunely the colonel and Mr. Thornton here entered the boudoir.

Thus strongly reinforced, Mr. Radcliffe ventured to renew the attack.

"I've been telling my wife, colonel, that you object to this young spark—this Hilary St. Ives," he said.

"I refuse to believe so unless I have it from your own lips, colonel," observed the lady, with one of her blindest smiles. "You have seen nothing of him."

"I have seen quite enough," rejoined the colonel. "I have no personal objection to the young fellow, and I regret to eject him from such comfortable quarters, but upon my soul! I think the joke has been carried far enough. I can't stand more of it."

"No joke is intended, my dear colonel. Surely, you don't suppose so?"

"Everybody else will think so, if I don't," he rejoined.

"I object to the fellow on other grounds," interposed Mr. Thornton. "A conceited puppy—and if I didn't fear offending the colonel I should say he presumes upon his likeness to him."

"How extremely silly you are, papa. The colonel will laugh at you."

"My dear lady," said the colonel, "I should not care about the matter if it were confined to your own circle—you are welcome to laugh at me as much as you please. But I cannot be made ridiculous in the eyes of Lady Richborough and Sir Charles."

"Didn't I say so, my dear?" cried Mr. Radcliffe.

"What would you have me do?" said the lady, with an imploring look at the colonel, which she thought would move him. "I have asked Mr. St. Ives to stay. I did not think his presence would be disagreeable to you."

"But it *is* disagreeable to him," cried Mr. Thornton—"infinitely disagreeable. It is disagreeable also to me."

Mr. Radcliffe did not venture to make a remark.

"It comes to this, my dear Mrs. Radcliffe," said the colonel, "that either he or I must go. Make your choice."

"Nay, then, I cannot hesitate," said the lady; "though I yield very much against my inclination."

"I'll go and give the young fellow his congé," cried Mr. Thornton, chuckling at the notion.

"Spare his feelings, I entreat, papa," said Mrs. Radcliffe.

"Oh yes, I'll spare him."

"I must see him before he leaves—tell him so."

"Of course, he'll come to bid you good-by."

The old gentleman winked at Mr. Radcliffe, and they left the room together.

"I think you will be sorry for compelling me to take this step, Seymour," observed the lady, in a tone of reproach, as soon as they were alone. "Have you no interest in this young man?"

"Interest!—none," he replied.

She shook her head sceptically.

"You cannot deceive me. You have defeated a scheme which I had devised for his benefit."

"It is not too late to repair the error," said the colonel. "If you have any motive for detaining him I will take my departure."

"My motive was to serve you, Seymour," said the lady.

"Serve me! I really cannot understand all these innuendoes."

Mrs. Radcliffe was about to reply, when the door opened, and Hilary entered the boudoir. His looks showed that he was greatly hurt and offended.

"After what passed between us a short time ago, madam," he said, "and the interest you professed to take in me, I did not expect to be thus summarily dis-

missed. It is to you, sir, I presume that I owe my dismissal?" he added to the colonel.

"You are welcome to entertain any opinion you please, sir," rejoined the other, haughtily.

"For Heaven's sake, Seymour," cried the lady, "do not treat him thus."

Hilary, who was evidently struggling with violently repressed emotion, said, in a hoarse voice, to Mrs. Radcliffe,

"May I speak to him?"

"No, no," she replied; "not now."

"I am de trop here, I perceive," said the colonel. "I have the honour to wish you good day, Mr. St. Ives."

"A moment, sir!" cried the young man, trying to detain him.

But the colonel repulsed him with a haughty gesture, and went out.

Hilary's enfeebled state did not enable him to bear up longer. He sank on the sofa, and Mrs. Radcliffe, alarmed by his looks, rang the bell.

As the colonel issued forth into the passage he found Mrs. Sutton. She had evidently heard what had just passed in the boudoir. Seizing his arm, and fixing a threatening look upon him, she said,

"I told you you ought not have come here. You have broken the compact, and are interfering with me. If this young man is driven away, look to yourself."

"I have made no compact with you, woman. Do

as you please," rejoined the colonel. And disengaging himself from her, strode on.

Just then the bell sounded, and Mrs. Sutton entered the boudoir.

On seeing Hilary's condition, she cast an angry and reproachful look at her mistress, that seemed to imply, "This is your work."

"I could not help it," cried Mrs. Radcliffe. "Don't upbraid me—but assist him."

Fortunately, there were plenty of restoratives at hand, and some of these being applied by the housekeeper, the young man soon regained his consciousness.

But he looked ghastly pale, and was still very feeble. He made an effort to rise, but fell back again.

"I cannot tell what has come over me," he murmured, trying to force a smile.

"The agitation you have just undergone has been too much for you," said Mrs. Radcliffe. "You must not think of leaving to-day. What say you, Sutton?" she added, appealing to her.

"You are the best judge," replied the housekeeper, coldly. "In my opinion he is not in a fit state to move. He ought not to have left his room at all to-day. Had he remained quiet this would not have happened. Worse may ensue. If he leaves the house, I will not answer for his life."

"He shall not go," said Mrs. Radcliffe, alarmed.

"Pray do not give yourself any further concern about me," said Hilary. "There is no real danger, I

am sure. This faintness will soon pass. I cannot remain here longer."

"Not if I command you?" rejoined Mrs. Radcliffe. "Have I not just said that I feel towards you as a mother?" she added, in a low, tender tone. "Stay for my sake. Mrs. Sutton cannot feel for you as I do, but she will take every care of you."

"I cannot feel for him!" exclaimed the housekeeper, with a burst of uncontrollable rage. "Oh, this is too much!"

"Forgive me, Sutton," said Mrs. Radcliffe, frightened. "You have done all that could be done for him—far more than I could have done. But—you understand."

"Yes, yes, I understand," rejoined the housekeeper.

"Are you able to move now, do you think?" she added to the young man, who arose with her assistance.

"Oh yes, my strength is returning."

"Ah! that is well," cried Mrs. Radcliffe. "Take him to his own room at once, Sutton. I will come to see you presently," she added, in her sweetest voice, to Hilary. "But keep quiet, I beg of you, and on no account leave your own room."

The young man promised compliance, and, with a look that bespoke profound gratitude mingled with almost filial affection, quitted the boudoir, supported by the housekeeper.

Mrs. Radcliffe stood at the door, and watched them as they moved slowly along the passage.

Just as they were about to enter a chamber on the left, Hilary perceived her, and smiled gratefully.

"He shall not leave, if I can prevent it," thought Mrs. Radcliffe, as she returned to the boudoir. "But I really must not neglect our guests," she added, adjusting her toilette, preparatory to going down-stairs.

V.

Contrary to Expectation, Sir Charles is accepted.

Soon after leaving the summer-house, Lady Richborough encountered Oswald, who was coming in that direction. He told her he was looking for her ladyship and May.

"Turn back with me, Mr. Woodcot," she rejoined with an arch look. "May is in the summer-house with Sir Charles."

"With Sir Charles!" echoed Oswald.

"Yes, and I don't think they would care for your company. You must make up your mind to lose your fair cousin. Sir Charles is resolved to carry her off."

"Ah! this is the plan they have had in view," thought Oswald. "No wonder I have been sent to the right-about."

"You can't suppose I am so blind as not to have perceived that you are desperately enamoured of your fair cousin," pursued her ladyship, "and I wouldn't have allowed Sir Charles to interfere, if I hadn't found out that May doesn't requite your passion."

"Much obliged for your kind intentions in my behalf," rejoined Oswald. "Luckily, they are quite unnecessary, since your ladyship has already made me perfectly indifferent to any rivalry on the part of Sir Charles."

"Ah! indeed—you surprise me. I am very happy to learn that. The object has been achieved quite unconsciously, I assure you."

"Not quite unconsciously, I should think," ventured Oswald.

"I should like to know how I have done it?" she remarked.

"The explanation is easy enough, and yet I have scarcely the courage to make it. When I fell in love with May, I had not seen your ladyship."

"Very prettily turned, upon my word, Mr. Woodcot," said her ladyship. "I am immensely flattered by being preferred to your charming cousin, but I cannot compliment you on your taste."

"It seems to me that I have given the best proof possible of taste," rejoined Oswald, "though I may be fairly taxed with inconstancy."

"Good again. You improve, Mr. Woodcot."

"I am glad to hear your ladyship say so," rejoined Oswald, rather more diffidently. "I am afraid I shall sink in your esteem if I venture to describe the effect produced upon me by your charms."

Her ladyship did not seem at all displeased. She had flirted a good deal with Oswald on the previous day, when he had luncheoned at Boxgrove.

"Let us hear the state of the case," she observed, laughing. "Are you very hard hit?"

"Very hard," replied Oswald.

"What are your symptoms?" she inquired, with an arch look.

"Violent palpitations of the heart—troubled dreams—total loss of appetite—disordered brain—suicidal tendency."

"A very bad case indeed," she rejoined. "Shall I prescribe for you?"

"It rests with your ladyship to save my life," he cried, with an impassioned look. "I am entirely in your hands."

"Promise to attend to the prescription, or I cannot give it," she said.

Promise given.

"Drink an extra bottle of bordeaux to-day in honour of your fair cousin. To-morrow run up to town for a week, and before you come back you will have forgotten all about me. Your cure will then be complete."

While rattling on in this way, her ladyship had kept a watchful eye upon the summer-house. She now perceived the pair come forth, and, laughing heartily at Oswald's consternation, flew to meet them.

She augured well from her brother's looks.

"It's all right—I see it is!" she cried, seizing both May's hands. "Make me happy by saying you have put the dear boy out of his misery."

"I don't know what I have said," replied May, who looked pale and confused.

"Not at all surprising, my love. Girls never do know what they say on these occasions. They leave men to put their own construction on their words. How do you interpret her answer, Charlie?"

"Most favourably," he replied. "I have reason to believe I am accepted."

"Reason to believe, dear boy! That's not enough. You must be certain."

"I have asked for a few hours' consideration," observed May.

"But I hope Charlie has not been foolish enough to grant the request. Why keep the dear boy in suspense? I would not allow a moment's delay. It should be now or never with me. Let me give this little hand to Charlie, and conclude the matter."

May tried to withdraw her hand, but she could not prevent Sir Charles from pressing it to his lips.

Before a word of protest could be uttered, Lady Richborough told May, in an undertone, that she could not now retract, and such was her ladyship's ascendancy over the young damsel that she felt unable to remonstrate.

"All is now satisfactorily concluded," cried her ladyship, greatly elated by her successful management. "I offer you both my heartfelt congratulations—you, my dear Charlie—and you, sweet sister that-is-to-be. May you both be as happy as I would have you!"

Just then the gong sounded for luncheon.

They were preparing to obey the summons, when Oswald, who had witnessed the scene at a distance—with what feelings we shall not attempt to describe—advanced towards them.

Lady Richborough begged him to go before them, and announce to Mr. and Mrs. Radcliffe that an en-

gagement had just been concluded between May and Sir Charles.

"I am sure you will be delighted to be the bearer of the joyful intelligence," said her ladyship.

Oswald winced, but could not refuse, and, with a sore heart, departed on his mission.

The others followed more slowly to the house.

VI.

Hilary leaves Hazlemere.

IMAGINE papa's and mamma's amazement—imagine grandpapa's delight—when Oswald informed them that May had accepted Sir Charles.

"Many a girl, I know, has accepted the man she meant to refuse," observed papa; "but I didn't think May was one of that sort."

"Nor I," rejoined mamma, who had just come down-stairs, and was greeted by the intelligence. "I can't understand it."

"But I can," cried grandpapa, chuckling and rubbing his hands gleefully. "It's all my doing. I've brought her to her senses."

"Begging your pardon, sir," remarked Oswald, "I should say, if May has been influenced by anybody, it is by Lady Richborough."

"Nothing of the sort," rejoined the old gentleman, sharply. "It's my doing, I tell you."

The foregoing discourse took place in the hall, where the party were assembled preparatory to going into the dining-room to luncheon. In another minute the newly-engaged couple came in, accompanied by Lady Richborough, who seemed in tip-top spirits. A scene of congratulations ensued, which will be readily

conceived. While affectionately embracing his granddaughter, the old gentleman whispered in her ear,

"You are a dear good girl, May, and won't regret following grandpapa's advice."

She made no reply. Indeed, she was almost overcome, and her great desire was to be alone. Rejoiced as he was at the resolution she had taken, her father looked at her anxiously, and noticed—not without misgiving—that she was exceedingly pale. She did not go in to luncheon with the others, but excusing herself to Lady Richborough, hurried to her own room, and throwing herself into a chair, gave vent to her emotion in a flood of tears.

When she looked up, she perceived the housekeeper standing before her.

"Oh, Sutton!" she exclaimed, "I have been very foolish—I have accepted him."

"I guessed as much," said the housekeeper, coldly. "Well, I congratulate you."

"Pity me, rather."

"Pity you!" cried the housekeeper, contemptuously. "No, I can't do that. Having taken the step, you must abide by it. I believe you have chosen well. You know my opinion of Sir Charles. Why are you not with them at luncheon?"

"I could not stand it. I am going down presently. Where is Mr. St. Ives? I did not see him in the hall when I came in. I was glad he was not there."

Mrs. Sutton looked at her searchingly, as she replied,

"I do not think you will see him again. He has been enjoined to leave the house immediately."

"Enjoined to leave!" exclaimed May, indignantly. "By whom?"

"By your grandpapa, but I believe at the instance of Colonel Delacombe. I am very sorry for it. But it cannot be helped."

"It must be prevented," cried May. "I will speak to grandpapa. He will not disoblige me so much. What does mamma say? Surely she will never allow Mr. St. Ives to be sent away thus!"

"What can she say, when every one is against her—even your papa? However, there is no use in discussing the matter. Mr. St. Ives is much hurt at the treatment he has experienced, and would not remain, even if requested. Unfortunately, he is scarcely in a fit state to move, for he has had a relapse, brought on by this excitement."

"Don't let him go, Sutton."

"I cannot prevent him, dear."

"I wish I could talk to him, but that would not be proper."

"I will tell him what you say," rejoined the house-keeper. "If it produces no other effect, it will console him."

And she departed on the errand.

Shortly afterwards, May left her room with the intention of joining the party at luncheon.

In the passage, near the landing, she found Hilary and Mrs. Sutton. Evidently they were waiting for her

coming forth. The young man moved forward feebly to meet her.

"I am come to bid you farewell, Miss Radcliffe," he said. "You have heard why I am leaving thus suddenly. I shall carry away with me a grateful recollection of your kindness."

"I have been urging him to delay his departure, but without effect," observed Mrs. Sutton.

"To remain longer would be impossible, after what has occurred," observed Hilary, in a tone that showed his resolution was taken.

"Farewell, then, since it must be so," rejoined May. "It will delight me to hear of your success."


"I shall strive to obtain distinction," he returned, "though I have not the incitement that I had to work. I have just heard that you are to be united to Sir Charles Ilminster. May I be allowed to wish you all possible happiness!"

Thanking him by a look, May again bade him adieu, and went down-stairs.

With a deep sigh that seemed to proceed from the inmost recesses of his breast, Hilary returned to his room.

Mrs. Sutton did not go with him, her presence being required below.

Hilary thought his heart would burst. All the hopes in which he had so foolishly indulged were crushed. The future was a blank. Worst of all, he was stung well-nigh to madness by a sense of wrong and injustice.



From this state he was roused by the entrance of Boston, who brought him some sandwiches and wine on a tray, which he placed on a little table beside him.

"Sorry to find you've had another attack, sir," observed the valet, in a commiserating tone. "A glass of sherry, I'm sure, will do you good. Allow me to pour one out for you. We've just been drinking our young lady's good health in the servants' hall, and coupling with it the name of the honoured gentleman with whom she is to be united. Ah! sir, Sir Charles is a fortunate man, and could not have made a better choice."

"I trust she will be happy with him," said Hilary, raising the glass to his lips.

"Little doubt of it," cried Boston. "She'll have everything she can desire—a splendid mansion and a wealthy spouse. Boxgrove is the finest place in this part of Surrey. You've not seen Sir Charles, I think?—a noble-looking gentleman. And as to the love he bears our young lady, his groom, Kennedy, who has been dining with us in the servants' hall, told Annette that he's awful spoony. We shall all be sorry to lose Miss May—for she's the life and soul of the house—but we couldn't wish her a better home, or a better husband than she's sure to get."

Hilary assented in a scarcely audible voice.

"Everybody seems delighted with the engagement, except Mr. Oswald, and he looks rather down in the mouth—but that's not to be wondered at. I never saw

master in greater glee than he was at luncheon, and as to Mr. Thornton, he's almost beside himself. They're all going over to Boxgrove this afternoon, as Sir Charles wishes to show the place to Colonel Delacombe and the old gentleman. Pity you're not able to join the party, sir."

Hilary made no reply, and the valet, noticing his increased paleness, kindly urged him to take another glass of sherry, and try to eat a mouthful—but the young man declined.

"Is Mrs. Radcliffe going to Boxgrove?" he inquired.

"Yes, sir; and her ladyship has asked Mrs. Sutton to accompany my mistress; so she's going too. The carriage is ordered immediately. That reminds me that I may be wanted. Can I do anything more for you, sir?"

"Nothing whatever," replied Hilary.

And the valet departed.

Shortly afterwards, Mrs. Radcliffe and the house-keeper entered the room—both arrayed for the drive. Mrs. Radcliffe was got up with great taste, and looked extremely well.

"I want to have some conversation with you," she said to the young man; "but I haven't time for it now. We're all going to Boxgrove, and shan't be back before seven o'clock in time for dinner. You'll have all the house to yourself, so ramble about it as you please, and do what you like. I can't stay a minute longer. Au revoir!"

Mrs. Sutton lingered for a moment, and said, in a low voice, "I am obliged to go with her. Do nothing till my return."

She then followed her mistress out of the room.

All this occurred so quickly, that Hilary had not had time to speak, but feeling that some explanation of his intentions was due to Mrs. Radcliffe, he arose as quickly as he could, and went out into the passage. Too late. They were gone.

Merry voices mingled with laughter, resounding from the great staircase and from the entrance-hall, told him that the party were just starting on the expedition, and though he felt the sight would give him pain, he could not resist the impulse that prompted him to proceed to a window which he knew commanded the principal entrance of the house.

A well-appointed landau, to which a pair of splendid bays were harnessed, was drawn up at the door. This carriage was destined for the elderly parties—though Mrs. Radcliffe would not have liked to be included in that list—and, as soon as they were seated, it was driven off.

The saddle-horses were then brought round, and the first to mount were Lady Richborough and May. Though dazzled by her ladyship's beauty, Hilary was far more attracted by May, whose slight symmetrical figure was seen to great advantage in a riding-dress. If not so bold a rider as her ladyship, May sat her steed with equal grace, and looked more feminine—a special charm in Hilary's eyes. Sir Charles was now

privileged to assist her to mount, and having performed this enviable office, he sprang into his saddle, and they rode off together. What would poor Hilary have given to be by her side. He watched them as they proceeded slowly towards the lodge-gates. It was an aggravation of his misery to perceive that May's lovely countenance had lost all trace of sadness. She smiled complacently upon Sir Charles, whose proud features wore an almost exulting expression.

Never, indeed, had the haughty baronet been happier than at that moment. The prize was won, when he had feared it would elude his grasp.

They were followed at a discreet distance by Lady Richborough, escorted by Colonel Delacombe and Oswald. The colonel was provided with the best hack in Mr. Radcliffe's stables—a thoroughbred chesnut. Not knowing his rider, the horse began to show off. But better horseman than Colonel Delacombe never existed, and the skill with which he managed the fiery animal filled Hilary with admiration. Even Lady Richborough was struck by the colonel's horsemanship, and complimented him upon it. He smiled. Praise from her ladyship was praise indeed. From that moment she resolved upon his conquest, and set about the task in earnest. Oswald was not badly mounted, and looked well enough, but she did not bestow a thought upon him.

Hilary watched them, and listened to their laughter, till they had disappeared, and the sound of their voices could be heard no more.

With a sad heart he then returned to his chamber, and surrendered himself once more to bitter reflections.

He had taken leave of May for ever. She would soon be the bride of another. He must think of her no more. This was the sharpest pang.

Next in point of intensity was the anguish caused by Colonel Delacombe's treatment of him. Here, however, pride and indignation came to his relief, and allayed his mental torture.

The necessity for action aroused him. Writing materials were upon the table, and taking a sheet or two of paper he commenced a lengthened letter, the composition of which occupied him more than an hour, for he paused frequently while engaged in the task.

He did not dare to read over what he had written, but folding up the sheets, both of which he had filled, he placed within them the bank-notes he had received that morning, and securing the letter and inclosure in an envelope, addressed it to Mrs. Radcliffe.

Next unlocking the chest of clothes, which had been placed in a corner of the room, and taking from it a knapsack, sent him in lieu of the one of which he had been plundered, he packed up within it a couple of shirts, and a few other necessary articles. These and a round felt hat were all he took. His preparations being completed, he left the room, taking the letter with him.

On the landing of the staircase he encountered Annette, to whom he confided the letter, requesting her to lay it on the table in her mistress's boudoir.

Annette looked very much surprised, and noticing the knapsack, ventured to inquire if he was about to take his departure.

Hilary replied in the affirmative, and putting a small gratuity into her hand, bade her good-bye, and descended the staircase. No one was in the hall at the time, and he left the house without attracting further observation.

Astonished at his abrupt departure, Annette did his bidding, and took the letter to the boudoir, twisting it about as she went, and wondering what it contained.

VII.

Boxgrove.

THE landau was slowly ascending the lofty and well-wooded hill on the summit of which stands the ancient mansion of the Ilminsters, when May and Sir Charles entered the park.

It was not May's first visit to Boxgrove. She had often been there before. But somehow the place looked different now—brighter and more cheerful. While cantering over the smooth turf, with Sir Charles by her side, gazing at her with admiration, she thought she had never discerned half the beauties of the park before. Perhaps the brilliant sunshine, flooding the groves and glittering on the vanes, gables, and bay-windows of the stately old pile, heightened the attraction of the prospect. A fine day will do wonders. But was there not something at work within her gentle breast? Was she not slightly elated by the idea that this proud domain might soon be hers? Certainly, as her eye ranged over the lovely scene, the thought crossed her, and quickened her pulse.

Boxgrove Park boasts timber of great age and great variety, wide-spread beeches, Druid oaks with huge gnarled trunks, Spanish chesnuts, and walnuts. No *such* walnuts to be found elsewhere. Besides these, *there* are hollies in abundance and of great size, splen-

did ilexes, groves of box that clothe the steepest parts of the hill, sombre avenues formed by black and matted yew-trees, while rows of tall straight pines edge the paths that lead through the tangled thickets. Here the red squirrel may be seen, here the harsh jay may be heard, and many another bird besides. In short, Box-grove Park is very beautiful, and very picturesque, and so May thought it.

But what chiefly delighted her was a large herd of deer couched beneath the trees about a hundred yards from the spot where she had halted for a moment to gaze around. Alarmed by the notice taken of them, the graceful animals quickly arose, and trooped off to an adjacent covert. May watched their movements with the greatest interest, and loudly expressed her admiration.

"Oh, the lovely creatures!" she exclaimed, "how well they harmonise with the scene! No park can be complete without deer."

"That is quite my opinion," observed Sir Charles. "They are generally to be seen from the house, and form a very pretty picture. I hope you will take them under your especial charge."

May thanked him with a smile.

"By-and-by they will know me," she said, "and I shall not frighten them when stopping to look at them."

Nothing could have delighted Sir Charles more than this simple observation.

"I know you sketch," he said. "You will find plenty of exercise for your pencil here."

"Yes," she rejoined, "I have already noted one or two charming little bits that will exactly suit me. I could spend hours among those trees."

"I hope you will," he said; "and I hope I shall be near you."

"That will never do. I must be alone, or I shall not be able to sketch. I am an enthusiastic admirer of old trees. Yonder aged oak is perfection. What a grand looking tree!"

"You have picked out the best tree in the park," said Sir Charles. "That oak is called 'The King of the Forest,' and is older by some centuries than the oldest tree near it. There are some magnificent beech-trees on the north side of the hill behind the house that deserve your attention."

"I know them well," she rejoined. "They are perfect beauties; such broad branches, and such clean silvery stems. I have sketched one or two of those beech-trees. Before long, I dare say I shall have made acquaintance with every tree in the park."

"Every tree in the park is yours from this moment," he cried.

"A princely gift!" she exclaimed. "But though I dote upon trees, I cannot accept it."

"Why not?" he demanded. "All I have is yours. Having given you my heart, the rest goes with it."

Sir Charles looked so like a preux chevalier while making this gallant speech that May thought him superb.

Homage like this is rarely paid now-a-days, and for the best of reasons—the girl of the period would laugh at it. With her the days of chivalry are for ever past. She does not understand the sentiment of devotion. Sentiment of any kind she derides. She neither desires to inspire a great passion, nor is capable of inspiring it. We have utterly failed in our portraiture of May, if she seems to bear any resemblance to a girl of this class. Hitherto, as we have shown, she cared very little for Sir Charles. She accepted him without knowing exactly why she did so—partly because she had been told most emphatically that her union with him would be agreeable to her family—but chiefly because she yielded to the influence exercised over her by Lady Richborough. Blame her not too severely, fair censor. Very likely you would have acted in the same way, if subjected to a similar ordeal. The really surprising thing is, that she did not fall in love with Sir Charles from the first. But there is no accounting for tastes. After accepting him, she repented—but it was then too late. During the ride to Boxgrove he made wonderful progress in her regard. She listened to what he said with pleasure—with something more than pleasure. Love was fluttering around her with his golden wings, though she could not distinguish him. At the critical moment he let fly the dart. Touched by Sir Charles's devotion, she now felt for the first time that she could love him. The thoughts passing in her breast could be read in her looks, and Sir Charles was not mistaken in them.

They were both roused from the delicious reverie, into which they had fallen, by light laughter, and looking round, beheld Lady Richborough approaching with her attendant cavaliers.

For the first time Sir Charles wished his sister away. In his present mood her high spirits were too much for him. As soon, therefore, as she and her companions came up, he said he should ride on to receive Mrs. Radcliffe, and with a look that conveyed a world of passionate regard to May, put spurs to his steed and galloped off towards the house. As he plunged into a grove of trees that lay between him and the mansion, May thought he looked like a paladin of old.

Reared about the middle of the sixteenth century by Sir Alberic Ilminster, Boxgrove was a magnificent mansion, partially castellated, with large transom windows filled with stained glass, and possessing many noble rooms, which were fortunately allowed to remain in their pristine state.

No material change had been made in the mansion since its erection, and even the old furniture, chairs, beds, antique mirrors, and hangings were carefully preserved, so that it was not merely a capital specimen of Tudor architecture, but gave an accurate idea of the internal decorations of a large house of the period.

The mansion was approached from the back through a turreted and embattled gateway, and over the entrance was a great stone shield, sculptured with the arms of the family. These were repeated on the garden gates, on the sundial, on the posts of the great

staircase, on the huge chimney-piece of the hall, and were, furthermore, emblazoned on several of the windows.

The hall to which we have just adverted, and which was entirely undefaced by modern alteration, with its gallery for minstrels, its long massive oak table, its great fireplace and andirons, recalled the days of baronial hospitality, which Sir Alberic and many of his successors had practised. In the hall was a full-length portrait of the doughty old knight, in ruff, doublet, and hose, with his favourite black hound by his side, and a certain resemblance might be traced in his proud features to those of his descendant.

The drawing-room was splendid, the ceiling being covered with a profusion of plaister ornaments, the wainscoting richly carved, and the chimney-piece ornamented with pillars and terms, and decorated with the arms of Elizabeth.

The dining-room had also a superb chimney-piece and richly-carved wainscot.

At the head of the staircase was a grand gallery, upwards of a hundred feet in length, filled with family portraits. Hence a passage led to the state bed-chambers, one of which had been occupied by Queen Elizabeth, and another by James the First, and in both were preserved the antique beds in which those sovereigns had reposed.

The beds were only used on state occasions, and their once rich hangings looked dim and faded, while the rooms themselves, hung with arras from the looms of Flanders, had a ghostly air.

All the bed-chambers, as we have intimated, retained their original furniture. Whether any of them were haunted we decline to state at present, but we must own that everybody who visited the royal apartments declared they must be haunted, and expressed a decided disinclination to sleep in them.

There was also a communication from the gallery, by means of a short staircase, to a private chapel, which was as large as many a country church.

The mansion looked towards the south, and the façade, with its splendid bay windows and richly sculptured portal, was most imposing. A broad terrace, with a stone balustrade, looked down upon the lovely slopes and glades of the park, and commanded the finest and most extensive prospect imaginable over a lovely district. Some magnificent cedars of Lebanon adorned the lawn.

In the large, old-fashioned gardens, quincunxes, clipped trees, and alleys were to be found; but many modern improvements had been here judiciously introduced.

Not only was Boxgrove a very fine old place, but it was extremely well kept, and this could not have been accomplished without the large establishment that Sir Charles Ilminster maintained.

Sir Charles had already dismounted, and stationed himself at the foot of the broad flight of steps leading to the entrance, when the carriage entered the court.

A bell rung at the gateway brought forth a host of

servants, chief among whom was the pompous old butler, Mr. Dancer, who, having served in the house before Sir Charles was born, considered himself the most important person in the establishment, being firmly persuaded that nothing could go on properly without him. Intelligence of the great event of the day, which was likely to produce such an important change in the domestic arrangements of the house, had already reached Boxgrove, being brought by Kennedy, the groom, who had been sent on by his master, and the news, though not wholly unexpected, caused an immense sensation in the household. Some were pleased, but the majority, we regret to say, were dissatisfied. Among the latter were the great Mr. Dancer, and Mrs. Trapp, the housekeeper, neither of whom were at all desirous of submitting to the dictation of a young mistress. Mrs. Trapp, who shared with the butler the rule of the house, did not at all approve of the choice that Sir Charles had made. Against the young lady's personal attractions she had nothing to say—Miss Radcliffe was pretty, no doubt—but her beauty was insipid, and she could not for a moment be compared with Lady Richborough. There was a fascinating woman—if you please. As to her family, the less said about them the better. She believed that Miss Radcliffe had a grandfather, who built Hazlemere, but she never supposed that the proud Sir Charles Iminster, who might have wedded an earl's sister, would stoop to the daughter of a city merchant. Pity old Sir Umfraville and her lamented ladyship were laid

in the family vault. They would never have allowed the match.

Mr. Dancer attempted to console her by observing that it would certainly have been far better for Sir Charles—more for his own happiness, and the happiness of all connected with him—if he would have remained a bachelor; but as he had allowed himself to be inveigled by an artful miss-in-her-teens, such an inexperienced girl might be more easily managed than a woman of twenty-five. He had always understood that Mrs. Sutton ruled supreme at Hazlemere, and never brooked the slightest interference on Miss Radcliffe's part. He recommended Mrs. Trapp to follow the example set her, which she faithfully promised to do.

Their colloquy was interrupted by the loud ringing of the bell at the gate, announcing the arrival, and summoning Mr. Dancer and a host of powdered lacqueys to the door.

Chasing away all signs of vexation from her comely face, Mrs. Trapp prepared to welcome her future mistress with a smile of delight.

Mrs. Radcliffe and the others had just been ushered into the hall, when May and those with her rode into the court. Again Sir Charles was in attendance on the perron, and assisting his intended bride to alight, led her into the house. No one would have supposed, from the profound respect paid her by the butler, by Mr. Spriggs, the valet, and the obsequious lacqueys, and the delight manifested by Mrs. Trapp, who had *already* made her appearance in the hall, and was

conversing with Mrs. Radcliffe—no one, we say, could for an instant have imagined that the slightest objection had been raised to Sir Charles's choice. Bows and smiles greeted May on all sides, and certainly her charming looks and extreme amiability of manner were calculated to disarm hostility. She addressed Mrs. Trapp most affably, and that domineering dame began to think that she should not object to a young mistress after all. While this was going on, Colonel Delacombe and Mr. Thornton, being strangers to the place, were shown round the ancient hall by Lady Richborough, who pointed out certain suits of armour, swords, and bucklers, with histories attached to them, and called their attention to the portrait of Sir Alberic. Little time was allowed for this examination. Sir Charles led the ladies into the dining-room, where a cold collation was set out, and the rest of the company followed. The collation was superfluous, since everybody—except May—had already partaken of luncheon; but a glass of wine was deemed indispensable to the occasion, and Clicquot and Château Yquem were handed round by Mr. Dancer and the footmen. Looks full of kindly meaning, and words of kindly import were directed towards May by grandpapa—and not by him alone—as the wine was drunk. Mrs. Sutton was present at the time—very much to the colonel's annoyance, for he felt that her eyes were constantly upon him, and her ears open to everything he said. He owed this infliction to Lady Richborough, who, wishing to show Mrs. Sutton especial attention, insisted upon her re-

maining with the company. After a second glass of champagne had been quaffed, the survey of the house began.

Mrs. Radcliffe was scarcely equal to the fatiguing task imposed upon her, but she would not be left out, and leaning on Mrs. Sutton's arm, went with the party. Climbing the grand old staircase was indeed a toil, but on reaching the gallery, she sat down, and examined the portraits with her eye-glass. Mr. Radcliffe, who was standing beside her, could not help remarking in an undertone what a fine thing it was to be connected with such an ancient and important family as was here represented. The company were dispersed about the gallery. Sir Charles and his intended had separated themselves from the rest, and seemed wrapped up in each other's society. All seemed going on as smoothly and satisfactorily as those interested in the match could desire, and papa and grandpapa were enchanted. Unfortunately, Mrs. Radcliffe's delight was marred by a circumstance which we must proceed to explain. The inconstant colonel was flirting dreadfully with Lady Richborough. No mistake about it. There they were seated together on a velvet-covered bench at the further end of the gallery—not looking at the portraits, but looking at each other, and talking in a very animated manner. If the colonel was making love, it was clear that he met with plenty of encouragement.

"Upon my word," observed Mr. Radcliffe, greatly amused by what was going on, "I shouldn't be surprised if we have another marriage in the family."

Mrs. Radcliffe had no business to be jealous—but jealous she was—and not being able to contain herself, her angry remarks made her husband laugh very heartily.

"I should have thought, my dear, you would be pleased that the colonel and her ladyship should make a match of it," he said.

"I am disgusted with the flirtation," rejoined his wife. "Do go and put a stop to it."

"Certainly not, my dear," he replied, moving away to examine the pictures.

Another person was likewise jealous—furiously jealous. The day was unpropitious to Oswald. During the ride to Boxgrove, her ladyship had been entirely engrossed by the colonel, who, sooth to say! seemed enthralled by her fascinations, and had scarcely condescended to notice him. Arrived at the house, she seemed quite unconscious of his presence.

"Decidedly, the colonel has cut you out," remarked Mr. Thornton to his grandson, with affected sympathy.

"Oh! I don't care," cried Oswald. "She is a heartless coquette. She flirted quite as much with me yesterday. To-morrow, it will be the turn of somebody else,"

"Sorry for you, notwithstanding," said the old gentleman, with a grave countenance, though he was chuckling internally.

Never for an instant was Mrs. Sutton's gaze removed from the couple whose undisguised flirtation

caused such heartburning and jealousy. She watched their looks, and, though at a distance, seemed to divine what passed between them.

Oh! how she hated the fascinating Myrtila, and if a look would have stricken her dead, she would have so destroyed her. It rejoiced her, however, to feel that Mrs. Radcliffe suffered equally; and the few remarks she made were calculated to inflame her mistress's jealousy. She knew how to plant the sting where it would be felt most keenly.

When at length the colonel and the syren who had charmed him arose, and marching towards Mrs. Radcliffe, inquired "how she liked the pictures?" she had become so agitated that she could scarcely make an intelligible reply. But the colonel did not notice her reproachful look, neither did he appear to trouble himself about Mrs. Sutton.

Very little attention, we are sorry to say, was paid to the portraits, and the celebrated beauties, proud cavaliers, and gallant gentlemen, ranged along the walls, had never been so shamefully neglected before. The living beauties were the sole objects of attraction—with two, at least, of the party. Sir Charles had eyes only for May—and the infatuated colonel thought Lady Richborough far more charming than Barbara Lady Ilminster, who bloomed in the days of George I., or than the rather décolleté dame who had been admired by James II. when Duke of York, though both were accounted the loveliest women of their time.

Taking Oswald's arm, Mr. Thornton desired him

to point out the best portraits. But the wretched young man proved a very indifferent cicerone. He was always either glancing towards May and Sir Charles, or trying to catch some of the colonel's gallant observations to her ladyship. Generally speaking, much to their credit, the Ilminsters had chosen fair women as their consorts. But there was one notable exception—a great heiress, but not a great beauty. And this lady, the bewildered Oswald informed his grandfather, was the gem of the collection. The old gentleman thought he was joking—but Oswald persisted, till he found out his mistake. It was a relief to the poor fellow when a move was made to the royal bed-chambers, for he then managed to escape from the thralldom in which he had been kept by the old gentleman, but he vainly tried to get a word from Lady Richborough. A visit to the private chapel completed the survey of this part of the mansion, and the party went down stairs.

They then proceeded to the billiard-room, and her ladyship taking down a cue, challenged the colonel, telling him, with a laugh, that she felt sure she could beat him. Of course, the challenge was accepted—and, of course, her ladyship was triumphant—for though a magnificent player, the colonel did not mean to win. Some betting took place during the game, and Oswald, who backed her ladyship, won a couple of sovereigns from his grand-dad.

The colonel had hoped that he should now be freed from the jealous surveillance to which he had been exposed. Vain expectation. Mrs. Radcliffe sat

down to watch the game, and, dissembling her rage, extolled Lady Richborough's play to the skies, declaring she had never seen anything like it. Mrs. Sutton remained with her mistress, and her cold grey eyes constantly, fixed upon the colonel rather disturbed his equanimity. However, he did not desist from paying court to her ladyship.

Meantime, Sir Charles and his intended had disappeared. They were in the garden, and remained there so long that Mrs. Radcliffe began to think they were lost, and sent her husband in search of them. He found them slowly returning from a sequestered walk, looking very like a pair of lovers.

Sir Charles was asking a question which he had already asked several times.

"Can you be happy here, dearest May?"

"For the twentieth time, yes," she replied;—"perfectly happy."

Certainly, if vast domains, a magnificent mansion, hosts of servants, and all the accessories of a princely establishment can confer happiness, it might be found at Boxgrove.

But with all its splendour, and all its attractions, May could not have been happy had she not loved Sir Charles. Now nothing dimmed the brightness of the prospect.

Did no thought of Hilary intrude itself? If it did, *she* banished it on the instant. Why think of him? *She* had been interested in him—nothing more. A

momentary dream. He must be forgotten. Union with him was out of the question.

Sir Charles felt he should be the happiest of men possessed of one so bright and pure—so utterly untainted by the world—as the fair nymph he had chosen. He loved her passionately—with a love that a proud and loyal heart like his alone can feel—and he vowed to devote his life to her.

Not liking to part with his visitors, Sir Charles proposed that they should stay dinner. Mrs. Radcliffe objected, declaring she could not venture to remain out so late. Besides, dinner had been ordered at home. Why not go back with them, and dine at Hazlemere?

Agreed to at once. Provided he was not separated from the object of his idolatry, Sir Charles did not care what arrangement was made. But he could not give up the supreme delight of riding back with May. Accordingly, evening dresses for himself and his sister were ordered to be sent on in the brougham, under the care of Mr. Spriggs. Pleading fatigue, Mrs. Radcliffe begged that her carriage might come round in an hour, and directions were given to that effect.

Colonel Delacombe must see the stables—the hunters were worth seeing, as he would find. So, Sir Charles being too much occupied to go with him, her ladyship volunteered to show them to him herself, and Mr. Thornton played the part of propriety and went with them.

Luckily, they were free from Mrs. Radcliffe, who

would as soon have entered a dungeon as a stable. However, in this instance she need not have been so mighty particular, for the stables of Boxgrove, which were personally superintended by Lady Richborough, were admirably kept—cleaner, her ladyship declared, than any drawing-room. A pair of bull-terriers belonging to Thorpe, the coachman, came out to greet her, and attended her during the inspection. She did the honours of the stable, if we may so speak, with inimitable grace; begged the gentlemen to do as they pleased in regard to a cigar. She didn't object to one. Sir Charles always smoked when he went over the stables with her. So they gladly availed themselves of the permission.

Attended by a couple of active young grooms, who obeyed her slightest gesture, she then led them from stall to stall. How well the horses knew her. What whinnying, what rattling of halters at the sound of her voice. A pretty sight to see her standing beside a favourite courser patting his satin coat, and proclaiming his merits. Pleasant to listen to her, while she dilated with flashing eyes upon the performances of the noble animal, who seemed to comprehend what she said, and testified his satisfaction as she told of his wondrous feats.

Sir Charles had a first-rate stud—not an indifferent horse in the collection. The colonel was in raptures, and would have been well content to remain for some time longer in the stables, especially in such delightful society.

But before the examination could be completed, they were summoned away. The landau had gone round, and the horses were being saddled. Go they must. Mrs. Radcliffe could not be kept waiting. Indeed, her ladyship felt she had neglected her shockingly.

That Mrs. Radcliffe was impatient to be off was manifest. Already she was in the carriage with Mrs. Sutton by her side, and her husband opposite her. The old gentleman's seat was the only one vacant. Into it he got as quickly as he could, for he discerned a frown on his daughter's brow. Lady Richborough was profuse in her apologies, but Mrs. Radcliffe smiled blandly and begged her not to say a word about it. It was very proper the colonel should see the stables, and she herself had been greatly amused by looking about the rooms; in fact, she had spent a most delightful day. She waved her hand to Sir Charles and May, who were standing on the steps, and the carriage drove off.

Scarcely had it passed through the great gate-way than the horses were brought round. Lady Richborough, though she wanted no assistance, allowed the colonel to assist her to the saddle. Kissing the silver handle of her whip to May, and glancing archly at her brother, she then rode off, escorted as before by the colonel and Oswald. Our young friend, who it must be owned, had been infamously treated, was now in the sulks, and as soon as they gained the park he dropped behind under pretence of lighting a cigar, and then, without making

an effort to overtake them, dashed off in a different direction. Poor fellow! we are concerned to say that his absence was not regretted.

"How very obliging of that dear Oswald to relieve us of his company," observed the colonel, laughing.

"I fear I must have slightly hurt his feelings," said her ladyship, displaying her pearls.

"Never mind! he won't break his heart—though mine would be broken if I were so treated."

"I very much doubt if you have a heart to break," cried her ladyship. "Allons! I will take you back through a different part of the park. We will go through the woods."

"Through the woods—charming!" cried the colonel.

Their course led them through some of the most secluded portions of the park, and after passing through the walnut and chesnut groves, previously mentioned, they were involved in a thicket which covered the lower part of the hill. The road, edged on either side by tall pines, was so narrow that they were obliged to proceed singly. However, this did not prevent the colonel, who brought up the rear, from addressing many a gallant speech to his fair companion. These could not have been very disagreeable to her, for ever and anon she turned a smiling face towards him, and at such moments looked irresistibly charming.

They were still in the midst of the thicket, when a tall young man was seen ascending the narrow road clothed in a grey Tweed suit, and having a knapsack

at his back. He seemed to require the aid of the stout stick which he grasped.

On seeing her ladyship he halted for a moment, and then came on. Owing to the interposition of the foremost horse, he could not distinguish the colonel, neither did the colonel perceive him. Her ladyship, however, shook her whip at her companion to check the rapturous speech he had just commenced, and he took the hint without exactly knowing why silence was enjoined.

As Lady Richborough drew near, the young man stepped out of the road to allow her passage. Leaning against a lofty pine for support, he raised his felt hat to salute her, revealing pallid but singularly handsome features, that startled her as she gazed on them.

In an instant she recovered from her surprise, and courteously returning the salutation, passed on. Looking back, she perceived, from the colonel's manner, that the stranger was not unknown to him. What surprised her still more was, that the colonel's countenance had assumed a very stern expression. He was evidently put out by the unexpected rencounter.

Reining in her steed, she said,

"You appear to know that young man, colonel. May I ask who he is?"

"I know very little about him," he replied, carelessly. "I met him this morning at Hazlemere. An artist, I believe, by name Hilary St. Ives."

"That Hilary St. Ives?" cried her ladyship. "Now,

indeed, I am surprised. Do call him back. I should like so much to speak to him."

"Your ladyship must excuse me if I decline to obey your behest," rejoined the colonel. "I can have nothing to do with that young fellow."

"Oh, indeed!" exclaimed her ladyship.

She saw something was wrong. But the colonel's manner did not encourage her to ask any further questions, and though still full of curiosity, she desisted.

But how came Hilary in Boxgrove Park? Above all, how came he in that secluded road, known to few, and frequented by none save inmates of the mansion?

The thought perplexed her strangely.

VIII.

Hilary's Letter.

A DISAGREEABLE surprise, as we are aware, awaited Mrs. Radcliffe on her return to Hazlemere.

As she entered her boudoir, she learnt from Annette, who was in attendance, that Hilary had taken his departure.

"The young gentleman left quite sudden, mem, about an hour and a half after you had started for Boxgrove, without mentioning his intention to any one — except me. He went away on foot, with a knapsack on his back."

"But surely he left some message for me?"

"Only this letter, mem, which he desired me to lay on your table. No doubt it will give you all perticklers."

Mrs. Radcliffe looked at the letter, but, much to Annette's disappointment, did not open it, deferring its perusal till she should be quite alone.

"I haven't time to read it now," she said. "I must dress for dinner at once. Lady Richborough will require your services presently. Her ladyship dines here to-day, and will dress on her arrival."

"Yes, mem, I knows. Mr. Spriggs have brought her la'yship's evening dress in the broom, and I've put it out all ready for her in Miss May's dressing-room."

A sweet pretty dress it is, mem, as ever I see, and I'm sure her la'yship will look charming in it, as she do in everything she wears."

Annette was not all prepared for the pique exhibited by her mistress at this observation. She followed her into the dressing-room, which communicated by a side-door with the boudoir. The dressing-room was very tastefully fitted up, with a large cheval glass hung with muslin, and a toilette-table covered with old lace, on which reposed numberless flacons of perfumes, boxes of pearl-powder and iris-powder, and pots of fard.

"Look out my prettiest dress, Annette," said Mrs. Radcliffe, seating herself in a chaise longue. "I must not be entirely eclipsed by her ladyship."

"No fear of that, mem," replied Annette, eager to repair the error she had committed. "I always says, and Mrs. Sutton will bear me out, that for grace and style—let alone good looks—no one can come up to our own dear lady."

"You are a silly creature, Annette, and I ought not to listen to such ridiculous flattery," said Mrs. Radcliffe, smiling. "My day is gone by."

"Oh no, mem, I can't allow that. Any one would take you for Miss May's elder sister."

"Bah! Choose the dress that you think will become me most. I really want to look well to-night."

"Then wear your white satin robe with the yellow satin panier, mem. You will put a complete distinguisher on her la'yship's pink dress."

Precisely what Mrs. Radcliffe desired. So the dress

recommended was adopted, and very charming her mistress looked in it, Annette declared.

Her task ended, Annette was departing, when Mrs. Radcliffe stopped her to inquire whether Mr. St. Ives had given any directions respecting his chest.

"No, mem, he said nothing about it, and I didn't think to ask him; but after he was gone I went to his room, and the first thing I see was the chest. The key was in it, so I thought there could be no harm in taking a peep at its contents. It was nearly full of linen and clothes—fine shirts as ever you see, mem, and spick-and-span new coats and waistcoats. I don't know what else there might be, for I had seen quite enough, and locking up the chest I put the key in my pocket, intending to give it to Mrs. Sutton on her return."

"Quite right. But don't give it her just now. She is busy about dinner, and this unexpected occurrence will put her out very much—as it does me."

"Begging your pardon, mem, Mrs. Sutton must have heard of the young gentleman's sudden departure from Mr. Luff. All the servants have been talking about it."

"Well, go and see after her ladyship. She must have arrived by this time. Make her look as charming as you can."

"You have nothing to fear from her, mem, I can assure you," rejoined Annette, as she quitted the room.

Mrs. Radcliffe then passed into the boudoir.

After a moment's hesitation, she opened Hilary's letter. The bank-notes dropped out upon the table and alarmed her, and her agitation increased as she read as follows:

"MADAM,—You desired me to await your return, but I cannot do so, for reasons which I shall proceed to state.

"I hope I shall not pain you by what I have to say. I would not wound the feelings of one to whom I owe so much, and for whom I feel such strong affection. But I must speak plainly, lest my conduct should be misunderstood.

"The mystery of my birth is no longer a mystery. Brought hither by fate, when proceeding in a different direction in quest of information, I have unexpectedly learnt the secret. But the knowledge thus strangely acquired has been dearly purchased. My true position has been revealed to me. I now know *why* I am disowned, and *why* I can never be acknowledged.

"Judging by my own emotions, I can guess what yours must have been, when carried away by excitement, you allowed the secret, which you have so long and so carefully kept, to escape your lips. The avowal, I know, was made unconsciously, and perhaps would have been recalled, had recal been possible. Would it had never been made!

"What extravagances I might have committed in the delirium of the moment, but for the interruption caused by your husband's entrance, I cannot tell. No

wonder I was scarcely master of myself, when I obtained the certitude that the mother whom I supposed to be dead was living and standing before me.

"But when my transports subsided, reflection convinced me that I had better have remained in ignorance of the secret.

"The discovery could profit me nothing. The necessity for concealment was strong as ever—stronger perhaps. No disclosure of my parentage could possibly be made without damage to the honour and happiness of others. I must remain what I am. On no consideration would I bring disgrace upon you, or upon those with whom you are connected.

"Were I to stay here longer I should not only offend your husband, for whom I entertain great respect, and from whom I have experienced great kindness, but I might also unintentionally imperil you. Prudence, therefore, enjoins my immediate departure. Another interview with you might shake the good resolutions I have formed.

"Some things connected with my history still perplex me, and these you might have explained. But I shall institute no further inquiries. I have learnt enough—too much, alas!

"You may desire to know what I propose to do. I shall strive to achieve an independence. I have marked out a career for myself which I shall steadily and unflinchingly pursue. Relying for success entirely upon my own energies, I can accept no further aid, even from those who may deem it a duty to aid me.

"Acting upon this resolve, I must respectfully decline Colonel Delacombe's late presents in money and clothing, and beg to return them to him, through you. Though poor enough, Heaven knows! I do not require the large sum he has thought proper to send me—nor any portion of it. My own hand will maintain me.

"One thing more. As I shall never bear his arms, even with a bend sinister, his signet-ring will be useless to me. Pray restore it to him. I do not now need the evidence it affords of my birth.

"In acting thus, do not suppose I am influenced by pride, or galled by the sense of injustice. I have no right to be proud; and if I have suffered wrong I can endure it without a murmur. I am actuated by feelings which, if I could explain them, would, I am sure, command your respect.

"To say that I can ever become reconciled to my enforced position would be idle and untrue. But I must learn to submit.

"Henceforth, I stand alone.

"Farewell, madam! Think of me sometimes, I pray you. I shall always think of you—always with affection. We may never meet again—better we should not—but rest assured whatever betide, you will never have reason to blush for him who is, unfortunately, compelled to subscribe himself,

"HILARY ST. IVES."

The perusal of this letter roused extraordinary

emotions in Mrs. Radcliffe's breast, and she was still under their dominion when Mrs. Sutton entered the boudoir. The housekeeper's haggard looks alarmed her mistress.

"Don't agitate me, Sutton, I beseech you. My nerves have been dreadfully shattered by this letter. Read it before you say a word."

The housekeeper sat down, and it was well she did so, for she had not read many lines when her strength completely failed her. A mist gathered before her eyes, but she brushed aside her tears and went on. Internal agony was plainly depicted in her countenance, and excited Mrs. Radcliffe's commiseration. But the housekeeper resented her sympathy.

"This is all your fault!" she cried. "The error you have committed may appear trifling, but it is fraught with fearful consequences, which cannot be repaired. You have led him to believe you are his mother, and he has gone away with that conviction. How is he to be disabused? You cannot find him. You cannot communicate with him. See what you have done. By an inconsiderate word you have deprived him of the few friends he possesses, and have thrown him upon the world without resources. For whatever misfortunes may happen to him you will be responsible. He tells you that you have made him wretched, and the whole tenor of his letter proves that he is so."

"Peace, Sutton, peace! I cannot endure this. No

misfortunes shall happen to him. I can still find means of aiding him."

"But he will not accept your assistance."

"He can be aided indirectly. The colonel will devise some plan for his benefit."

"The colonel will do nothing for him. I am sure of it."

"You are unjust towards the colonel, Sutton. He has shown every disposition to help the poor young man."

"How?" demanded the housekeeper, sceptically.

"Has he not just sent him five hundred pounds and an expensive outfit? What further proof do you need of the interest he takes in Hilary's welfare?"

Mrs. Sutton could make no rejoinder.

"No one could have foreseen the unfortunate turn that things have taken," pursued Mrs. Radcliffe. "Hilary's pride—though, like all proud people, he denies that he has any pride—is a stumbling-block in the way of his advancement. I fear also that he is wanting in gratitude. I observe with pain that he does not allude to you in his letter. I trust he has written to bid you farewell, and thank you for your great kindness to him."

"He has not written to me," rejoined the housekeeper, with difficulty repressing a pang.

"He is much to blame for the neglect. But his thoughts, no doubt, were occupied with me, whom he looks upon as his mother. A strange mistake, and yet not surprising—all things considered."

"It is not surprising at all, after what you have aid to him," cried the housekeeper, sharply. "He is one. Let him take his own course."

"No, I cannot desert him. I must watch over him —unseen, unknown. You shall act for me, Sutton."

"I can make no promise."

"You are hurt by his ingratitude towards you, and don't wonder at it. But you must make allowances for him. We will talk more on the subject to-morrow. Meantime, I must put these things by."

"I should like to read that letter again. Leave it with me, if you are going down-stairs."

"Excuse me, dear Sutton. I know the letter would be safe with you. But I cannot trust it out of my own custody."

As she spoke, she locked up the letter and the roll of bank-notes in a tiroir of the bureau.

If she could have seen the look bestowed upon her by the housekeeper while she was thus employed, she would not have gone down to dinner with as much composure as she did.

IX.

A little Music in the Drawing-room, and a little Talk in the Dressing-room.

No one ~~would~~ have suspected from Mrs. Radcliffe's looks and manner during dinner that anything was on her mind. Greatly disturbed by Hilary's abrupt departure, her jealousy was again excited by the colonel's continued attentions to Lady Richborough. Yet her countenance had a placid expression, and a smile was upon her lips. Despite all Annette's efforts, she was completely thrown into the shade by her ladyship, who looked surprisingly well in an evening dress. White as Parian marble, Myrtilla's lovely neck and shoulders might have served as a model for a sculptor, while the classical mould of her features would have suggested a representation of the goddess of the silver bow. She was in high spirits, and though her sweetest smiles and most bewitching glances were bestowed upon the colonel, she dispensed her fascinations around, and did not even neglect poor Oswald. In short, she was extremely useful as well as highly ornamental, and communicated a vast deal of life and spirit to the party, which might have flagged without her aid, for Sir Charles talked only to May.

Her ladyship's curiosity having been excited by the rencounter in the morning, she brought up the subject of Hilary St. Ives. But no one seemed inclined to

talk about him. Mr. Radcliffe could give no explanation of his sudden departure; and Mr. Thornton shrugged his shoulders when questioned. He knew nothing about the young fellow, and was heartily glad he was gone. That was all he had to say. Very strange. She thought Mrs. Radcliffe could tell her something, and resolved to seek an explanation from her in private.

Dinner excellent. The cabinet Johannisberg warmed grandpapa's heart, and the '20 port, which appeared with the dessert, put him into a blissful state. Apropos of the dessert! we may be permitted to mention that Macdonald's strawberries were magnificent, and Sir Charles told Mrs. Radcliffe that he must certainly carry away her gardener.

The health of the queen of the fête was of course drunk in bumpers, and the few words uttered on the occasion by grandpapa caused a good deal of laughter, and raised some blushes on May's cheek.

Soon afterwards the ladies retired, and the gentlemen quickly followed them—much too quickly for Mr. Thornton, who had not half finished his bottle of '20 port. He hated to be hurried in this way. Why should not a man be allowed to enjoy his wine?—especially wine like this.

"Do tell me something about this mysterious Hilary St. Ives?" said Lady Richborough to Mrs. Radcliffe, as they entered the drawing-room together.

"He is an artist, that is all I know about him," was the evasive reply.

"But why has he left you so suddenly?"

"Grandpapa and the colonel objected to him. I know no other reason."

"Oh! the colonel objected to him!—that's odd! Do you know that I was very much struck by his likeness to the colonel."

"Have you seen him, then?"

"Yes. As the colonel and I were riding back through one of the thickets in the park, we came upon him quite unexpectedly. I had not the slightest idea who he was at the moment—but the likeness startled me."

"Strange you should meet him there? What could he be doing in the park?"

"Just what I want to know. Does he intend to remain in the neighbourhood?"

"I should think not. I fancy he is going to town to practise his profession."

"Boxgrove is out of the way, if he was going to town. He must have had some motive to take him there."

"I can conceive none, unless he desired to take some views of the park. It is certainly strange he should be there. If you see him again, or hear anything more of him, pray inform me."

"Aha! she takes an interest in him, I perceive," thought her ladyship. "There must be some reason for his sudden departure."

Naturally, she promised compliance, and then added quickly, "You will think I am troubling you

with questions—but tell me! Is Colonel Delacombe a widower? You are aware I have seen him for the first time to-day, and know very little of him except by report as a distinguished officer.”

Guessing the object of the inquiry, Mrs. Radcliffe could not help smiling.

“A widower! no!” she rejoined. “Colonel Delacombe has never been married. I can state that positively.”

Her ladyship appeared very well satisfied by the assurance.

“What are you talking about?” asked May, joining them.

“Before replying, Lady Richborough consulted Mrs. Radcliffe by a glance, that seemed to say, “Shall I tell her?” and received a look signifying, “Better not.”

She therefore answered, “I have been propounding a riddle, which mamma finds it difficult to solve. Come to the piano. I want to practise a duet with you before the gentlemen appear.”

The evening passed off delightfully. Lady Richborough was so much occupied at the piano, that she could not flirt with the colonel, though she held him in thrall by her voice, and ever and anon electrified him with a glance. Consequently, Mrs. Radcliffe was quite easy, and able to enjoy the music. Oswald likewise, who had been unmercifully rallied by his grand-sire, put on a cheerful air, and accompanied the ladies on the cornet-à-piston.

Myrtila in a riding-habit, on horseback, or in the stable—laughing, jesting, indulging in a little harmless slang, and tolerant of a cigar; Myrtila in the drawing-room, in a costume not calculated to conceal her splendid neck and shoulders—dazzling, refined, accomplished—so different was her ladyship under the two aspects, that she scarcely resembled the same person.

If the colonel was captivated by the fair equestrian, whose predilection for the stable and fondness for its occupants in no way displeased him, he was perfectly fascinated by the grace and accomplishments of the high-bred dame. Conscious that she looked well at the piano, Myrtila enthroned herself before the instrument during the evening. Gifted with a rich contralto voice, she sang the "brindisi" almost as well as Alboni, and completed her performance by a grand fantasia, which she executed with wonderful brilliancy.

The colonel and Mr. Thornton were transported, and expressed their delight with enthusiasm, but Sir Charles, who was accustomed to his sister's wondrous performances, very much preferred a simple ballad, which was exquisitely sung by May. It held him breathless as he listened.

Delightful as it was, the evening came to an end. Before the party separated, arrangements were made for next day. Everybody was to dine at Boxgrove, and come over early if the day should prove fine—to play at croquet, or ramble about the park.

Mrs. Radcliffe, as usual, feared it would be too

much for her, but promised to come, nevertheless. What laughing there was in the hall! And how Sir Charles envied his sister the kiss she received from May as she bade her good night!

The colonel had a tender word for her ladyship, and gently squeezed her hand, while leading her to the brougham.

"Well, dear boy!" cried Myrtila, as they were borne swiftly towards Boxgrove, "I can really and truly congratulate you. You will have the sweetest wife in England. But what's to become of poor me, when you are married?"

"Why you will live with us, of course," he rejoined.

"Not at all of course. Perhaps, your wife won't like me."

"Nonsense! you know better."

Her ladyship appeared abstracted for a moment, and then tapping him with her fan, said, "Light a cigar. Don't go to sleep."

"I never was less inclined to sleep," he rejoined.

"What do you think of Colonel Delacombe?" she asked, rather abruptly.

"What do *you* think of him, Myrtila? That's more to the purpose," he rejoined, with a laugh. "Are you disposed to return with him to India?"

"I shouldn't altogether dislike it. I suppose he is well off. Find out all about him for me, dear boy."

Sir Charles told her there was no necessity to make any inquiries respecting an officer so well known and

so distinguished as Colonel Delacombe. Thereupon, he lighted a manilla, and her ladyship fell into a reverie, which lasted till they reached the house.

Here we shall leave them, and return to May, who had already retired to her dressing-room, and while preparing for rest was ruminating upon the events of the day, when a gentle tap at the door announced the housekeeper.

"Oh, Sutton, I'm so glad to see you!" cried May. "I want to know what has happened to poor Hilary St. Ives. Annette tells me he has left a letter for mamma. You have seen it, of course?"

"Yes, but there are secrets in it, which I am not permitted to disclose."

"Secrets! Dear me, how dreadfully mysterious! You quite rouse my curiosity. Am I not to know a little bit of the letter?" she said, in a coaxing tone.

"No, I daren't speak. Besides, you can't take any interest in the poor young man now."

"You are mistaken, Sutton, I take the greatest interest in him—in his welfare, I mean. I have been thinking of something for him."

"Indeed!"

"Yes. Our portraits—that is, the portraits of Sir Charles and myself—are to be placed in the great gallery, which you visited this morning, Sutton. I mean Hilary to paint them."

"But will Sir Charles consent?"

"Sir Charles will do anything I like. He will be delighted to encourage genius."

"I fear he will not have an opportunity of doing so in Hilary's case. The poor young man is gone. He does not desire to be heard of more. I suspect he means to change his name."

"Well, I must say it is very stupid of him—very annoying—just when I had arranged it all so nicely."

"He could know nothing of your kind intentions. But I don't think he would have painted the portraits."

"Yes, I'm sure he would—if I had asked him," she cried, in a tone of pique. "I'm quite angry with him for being so foolish."

"Do you recollect our conversation before breakfast this morning, dear?" said Mrs. Sutton, fixing an inquiring look upon her. "Are you quite satisfied with what you have done since? Don't be afraid of confiding in me."

"Yes, dear Sutton, my feelings are entirely changed since morning. I have discovered that I can love Sir Charles—nay, I *do* love him. All his noble qualities have been revealed to me, and I am surprised I should have been so long blind to them."

"When did you make the discovery?—at Boxgrove?" inquired the housekeeper, in an ironical tone.

"You think me inconstant, I perceive, but I am not so. This morning my heart was perfectly disengaged—and I own I should not have listened to Sir Charles except on his sister's persuasion. I now know him better than I did. As I first looked into his eyes, I read truth and loyalty in them—and such

devotion, Sutton. I am sure he would lay down his life for me if I required it. He said so."

"A mere phrase!" cried the housekeeper, with an ill-disguised sneer. "All men say so."

"It was not an idle phrase with him, but of course I don't mean to put his devotion to the proof."

"No, that wouldn't be prudent. You would lose Boxgrove."

"It strikes me, Sutton, that you are not pleased that I have accepted Sir Charles."

"All I desire is your happiness, dear."

"Then rest easy. I shall be perfectly happy with him."

"At all events, you will be Lady Ilminster—mistress of one of the most splendid seats in the county, and while elevating yourself, you will have the satisfaction of feeling that you have elevated your own family."

"I don't exactly like what you say, Sutton, nor the tone in which you say it. I know that I love Sir Charles—not for his title—not for Boxgrove—but for *himself*—though you would imply the contrary—and I am sure I shall be happy with him."

"Well, I hope so. Good night, dear! May your slumbers be light and pleasant."

As she left the room she muttered to herself, "Impossible to shake her! She is as worldly as her mother."

"Something is the matter with Sutton to-night," thought May, as she was left alone. "She appears to be put out by poor Hilary's departure. Well, I am

sorry I cannot help him, but perhaps it is better he is gone."

Shortly afterwards she sought her couch, and sweet dreams springing from a pure and gentle heart hovered above her pillow.

Thus ended May's nineteenth birthday.

X.

The Colonel's Opinion of the Letter.

NEXT morning Mrs. Radcliffe did not make her appearance at breakfast. Nor could this be wondered at, after the fatigue she had undergone on the previous day. Besides, she had another fatiguing day in prospect.

"However, she sent a message by Mrs. Sutton to Colonel Delacombe, begging him to come up to her boudoir after breakfast, as she wished to have a little conversation with him.

To hear was to obey. Though for many reasons the colonel would willingly have avoided the proposed tête-à-tête.

On repairing to the boudoir, he found the lady reclining in her accustomed fauteuil near the fire—for there was still a fire, though the day was bright and warm—got up for the occasion in an elegant dishabille. Languor in her manner, reproach in her looks.

Saluting him in a faint—very faint—voice, she did not attempt to rise—that would have been too great an effort—or even offer him her hand, though he hesitated not to take it. She prayed him to be seated, but the colonel preferred standing with his back to the fire, regarding her with what he intended for a strong expression of sympathy.

Neither of them dreamed that the door communicating with the dressing-room, which was concealed by a screen, was left slightly ajar, and that the person stationed behind it could hear, and *did* hear, all that passed.

"I am afraid you rather overdid it yesterday, Esther," said the colonel. "You look sadly jaded."

"Yes; but I am suffering from low spirits—not fatigue."

"Low spirits! This is not the time to indulge in the vapours when you have made such a capital hit with your daughter. You have got everything you could desire. Boxgrove is really the finest old place I ever saw, and Sir Charles is excessively gentleman-like and agreeable."

"Yes, I don't complain. I am perfectly satisfied with May's choice. Apropos of Sir Charles! what do you think of his sister?" demanded the lady, fixing her eye-glass upon him.

"Now it's coming," he thought. "A very fine woman. Time was when I should have fallen desperately in love with her."

"Time *was*, Seymour!" cried the lady, reproachfully. "Say, rather, time *is*. It appears to me that you are just as impressionable as ever. I was grieved to see you make such a ridiculous exhibition of yourself yesterday. You fancy her ladyship is struck. My poor, dear, deluded friend, she was only trifling with you, as you will find to your cost, if you think at all seriously of a heartless coquette, who flirts with every

man she meets. You saw how she treated Oswald. Well, the day before she was flirting violently with him, and half turned the poor boy's head. I suppose you know she loses her jointure if she marries again?"

"A hint to that effect was given me by Mr. Thornton. But what is her jointure to me? I don't care about it."

"But you care a great deal about the lovely widow—that is evident. Nay, no protestations to the contrary. They won't pass with me. Listen," she exclaimed, altering her manner. "You shall not say that I am in the way. I release you from your vow. But for your own sake, Seymour, as you value your peace and comfort, don't choose Myrtila. She will drive you frantic with jealousy."

The colonel laughed carelessly.

"A capital joke," he cried. "I rather fancy I can take care of myself. He ladyship may use a needle-gun, but since I shall keep out of range, she won't hurt me."

And he again laughed gaily.

Mrs. Radcliffe shook her head and sighed:

"Ah, you men—you men! base deceivers ever! But to change the theme. I have a letter to show you."

"A letter!" he exclaimed, with internal misgiving. "I hate letters. For one that is pleasant we get a dozen disagreeable."

"I am sorry to inflict this upon you, but you must see it. It is from Hilary St. Ives."

"From him! ha!" cried the colonel, knitting his brows.

Seating himself, he read the letter deliberately, without making a remark, but his looks grew sterner as he went on.

"This would be laughable were it not serious!" he cried, tossing down the letter angrily when he had done. "I suppose we must treat it seriously, though it scarcely deserves to be so treated. The young fellow seems half crazed. The knock on the pate that he got from the gipsies must have confused his intellects. Several points require explanation."

"You can best explain one point, Seymour," rejoined Mrs. Radcliffe. "Pardon me if I put a direct question to you. The circumstances of the case must plead my excuse. You may be perfectly frank with me. Have you any reason to believe this young man to be your son?"

"Pardon me, my dear Esther, if I reply by another question. Have *you* any reason to believe yourself to be his mother?"

"For shame, Seymour!" she cried, with affected indignation. "This is too bad."

"Not a bit worse than the accusation you bring against me."

"Well, I have another interrogation to put. Since you deny the parentage, pray, what was your motive

for sending him the five hundred pounds and the outfit?"

"On my honour, I have sent him neither."

"But here are the bank notes to confute you, and the clothes-chest is in his room."

"Another hand has been at work—not mine," he rejoined, gravely. "This is a most vexatious business, and you yourself—from the best of motives—have contrived to complicate it. With regard to the money which you suppose came from me, I advise you to commit it to the keeping of Mrs. Sutton. She may find an opportunity of communicating with the young man. But do not meddle further in the matter yourself. You have already done too much."

"I will act as you suggest. I don't like the charge of the money. One more question and I have done. How came your signet-ring in Hilary's possession?"

"Now, I confess you puzzle me. I can only answer that I lost the ring many years ago—before I went out to India."

"Before you knew me, Seymour?"

"Why that question? Yes. It may have been stolen from me with some such design as has just been put in practice. Are you satisfied?"

"I must be. May I keep the ring?"

"Certainly. But let me burn that letter. It compromises you most seriously."

The person outside the door was upon the point of rushing into the room to prevent, at all hazards,

the destruction of the letter, but Mrs. Radcliffe's answer checked her.

"No, I can't allow you to burn it," she cried, snatching the letter from him. "No one shall see it."

"This is downright madness," cried the colonel. "Suppose the letter were to fall into your husband's hands, what would he think of it?"

"Such an event will never occur. Mr. Radcliffe never opens any of my drawers."

The colonel did not look half satisfied, but he saw it was useless to remonstrate further, for Mrs. Radcliffe proceeded to lock up the letter, the bank-notes, and the ring.

"There, they are all safe now!" she cried.

"I hope Mrs. Sutton has not got a key of that drawer," he remarked.

"No, no. This is the only key I don't trust her with."

"You trust her a great deal too much, Esther. Be cautious."

"My dear Seymour, she is fidelity itself, and would never betray a secret of mine."

"Then her looks belie her. I am a physiognomist, you know, and I warn you against her. She is treacherous."

"Treacherous! why, you have just advised me to give her the five hundred pounds."

"Because I would thather she had it than you. Hist!" he cried, "I thought I heard a noise."

"As the words were uttered the dressing-room door was softly closed.

Just in time, for the colonel looked over the top of the screen, but of course made no discovery.

"Where is Mrs. Sutton?" he asked.

"I don't know. Possibly in my dressing-room. She went there just before you came in. Have you anything to say to her?"

"Merely a word."

"Just touch the bell then."

The colonel did as enjoined, and shortly afterwards Mrs. Sutton made her appearance.

The colonel fixed a stern and searching look upon her.

"Your mistress has some money to give you," he said. "You will know what to do with it."

The housekeeper looked inquiringly at Mrs. Radcliffe.

"Yes, the money sent to Hilary. You understand, Sutton. The colonel thinks you ought to have charge of it."

"Yes, and the clothes-chest too. Take care of that. And see that your mistress is no further troubled."

"Is Colonel Delacombe master here?" said the housekeeper to Mrs. Radcliffe. "Am I to take his orders or yours?"

"You will be pleased to take mine now," said the colonel, with a look that crushed her, as he quitted the room.

XI.

A Sketch taken in Boxgrove Park.

By the time the colonel got down-stairs he had quite recovered his composure, and was able to offer a very cheerful greeting to Sir Charles, who had arrived during his absence. This early visit was not included in the arrangements of the day, but was none the less agreeable because unexpected. The only thing that marred the colonel's satisfaction was that her ladyship had been left behind. Far too considerate to interrupt a tête-à-tête, already commenced by the lovers in the drawing-room, he strolled out into the garden to smoke a cigar, and think matters over.

His meditations were chiefly occupied by Myrtilla, of whom, notwithstanding his assertions to Mrs. Radcliffe, he had become violently enamoured; and though he entertained no doubt that her captivating ladyship was the coquette she had been represented, he did not feel uneasy on that account. Vanity whispered that she wouldn't throw him over. She was just the person to suit him. Such a wife would give him additional éclat. Her unrivalled beauty would create an immense sensation in India. He didn't care how much she was admired. Esther declared he would be frightfully jealous. Bah! He laughed at the idea. His was not

a jealous nature. But hold! he was getting on rather too fast. There was a trifling difficulty in the way that had to be removed—a difficulty that he could not have foreseen a few days ago. The consideration of this difficulty, which to any other than the colonel would have appeared insurmountable, necessitated a second cigar—even a third. Nor when that was consumed had he arrived at a satisfactory conclusion.

At last, he resolved to ride over by himself to Boxgrove, and have a talk with her ladyship. Having communicated his design to Mr. Radcliffe, that gentleman ordered a horse to be brought round for him at once.

However, we will mount a courser fleetier than any in our respected friend's stables, and speeding to Boxgrove, ascertain what the lovely Myrtilla was about.

It may be asked why she did not accompany her brother? To this we must reply that Sir Charles did not particularly desire her company. A real lover, when not in the society of the mistress of his heart, wishes to be alone.

Her ladyship rode with him to the lodge-gates, and then receiving a hint to the above effect, quitted him, and continued to take exercise within the park, riding about in different directions for some time.

Her thoughts, we may be permitted to say, were occupied with the colonel, and she was considering whether it would be worth while to accept him.

All at once, she caught sight of a figure among a grove of trees which at once fixed her attention.

The person she beheld was seated upon the root of a large beech-tree, and was evidently sketching the mansion, which could be very well seen from the position he had selected.

*his
health
from
suffering
from*

Entertaining no doubt that the sketcher was Hilary St. Ives, she determined to have a word with him. Bashfulness, as we are aware, was not her ladyship's foible. A circuitous route brought her to the back of the wood, and she came upon him by surprise. He was so much engrossed by his task that he did not notice her approach till she was close beside him. When he perceived her, he arose in some confusion, and took off his hat to salute her.

"Do not let me interrupt you, I beg," she said, with a gracious smile. And wishing to put him completely at his ease, she added, "Mr. Hilary St. Ives, I believe."

Bowing assent, he rejoined, "I am afraid I am an intruder; but I was so struck with this fine old mansion yesterday that I could not quit the neighbourhood without making a sketch of it."

"Will you allow me to look at the sketch?"

"With the greatest pleasure. But I fear it won't please you. I haven't satisfied myself."

"I like it very much," she rejoined. "I don't see how it could be improved. Many sketches have been taken of the old place, but I like none so much as this. I think you have chosen the best view of the place."

"Every view of the mansion is picturesque and striking. It would make a dozen capital pictures."

"Can I prevail upon you to execute them? I will endeavour to make it worth your while to oblige me."

"I should be delighted to do your bidding, and without other reward than such commendation as you have bestowed upon this worthless sketch. But I am going away immediately."

"The delay of a day or two cannot much matter, I should think," she remarked, with a captivating smile.

"Your ladyship may be quite sure that if I had not good reason for declining, I would not hesitate to obey you."

"You know me, I perceive."

"Once seen, your ladyship is not likely to be forgotten. I caught a glimpse of you at Hazlemere yesterday, and later on I was fortunate enough to meet you in one of the thickets of this park."

"Yes. Colonel Delacombe told me your name. I had heard of you previously."

She looked at him as she made the observation, and perceived that a shade came over his brow.

"Do you know the colonel?" she asked.

"I never saw him before yesterday. I appear to have given him some offence—certainly most unintentionally on my part. But he seems to have conceived a strange antipathy to me, and has caused my dismissal from Hazlemere. Till he appeared, I experienced nothing but kindness from Mr. Radcliffe and every inmate in the house."

"And you cannot account for his dislike of you?"

"Perhaps I can—but I cannot very easily explain it. To speak frankly, it is to avoid meeting him again that I desire not to remain longer here."

"Have you practised as an artist in London, Mr. St. Ives?" she inquired, after a pause. "Perhaps you are a student of the Royal Academy?"

"No, I have not that distinction," he rejoined. "I have but lately returned from Paris, where the first essays in my profession were made, and it is possible I may go back there. If your ladyship cares to know my history, you can learn it from Mrs. Radcliffe."

"I shall learn very little from her," she rejoined, smiling. "To tell you the truth, I have already made the attempt."

"Mrs. Radcliffe acted wisely," he observed, with a melancholy smile. "There is nothing to interest you. My history will best be told some ten years hence."

"Ten years hence! that's a long time. We shall all be grown old then. You expect to become famous—eh?"

"I aspire to win reputation as a portrait painter."

"A future Sir Joshua—eh?"

"I hope some day to have the honour of painting your ladyship's portrait. Sir Joshua himself could not have desired a better subject."

"I shall be delighted to give you a sitting," said her ladyship, with a well-pleased smile. "But I can't wait ten years. I shall have lost my good looks before *that*."

"You shall not wait ten minutes, if you will allow me to sketch you. I succeeded tolerably well with Miss Radcliffe yesterday, and I may be as fortunate with your ladyship."

"So you have taken May! She has never shown me your performance. I should like to have Azo taken of all things. Try what you can make of us."

Hilary immediately opened his portfolio, and prepared for the task.

Moving her horse to a little distance, her ladyship took up a position.

"Will that do?" she asked.

The artist nodded approval.


"Stand still, Azo," she cried, smoothing her steed's silken mane with the handle of her whip. "My pet is going to have his picture taken."

And as if he understood what was required of him, Azo remained tolerably quiet.

Hilary, as we know, worked with great rapidity. But he had more to do now than on the previous occasion. However, he got through his task with surprising expedition, and succeeded in making a most spirited sketch.

Her ladyship was enchanted. Praise to a young artist is delicious, but praise from such lips as Myrtila's is indescribably sweet.

"Landseer could not have done better," she cried, enthusiastically. "My pet Azo is drawn to the life. I must have this sketch, Mr. St. Ives. Ask anything you please for it—*anything*."



"I will only ask you to accept it," he rejoined, blushing with pleasure.

"Nay, I really cannot——"

"Since I must have some reward, give me this glove."

She had dropped it, while examining the sketch.

"Upon my word, you are a proficient in gallantry as well as art," cried her ladyship, smiling.

"I shall keep it as a souvenir of Boxgrove," he cried, placing the glove within his breast.

The refined gallantry of his manner was not lost upon her.

"Decidedly, he is no common person," she thought.

With one of her most captivating smiles, she then asked him if he would like to see the house, adding, that she would have great pleasure in showing it to him.

"I know how much I shall lose in declining your ladyship's tempting offer," he replied. "But I cannot run the risk of meeting any of the party from Hazlemere."

"Don't be alarmed on that account. None of them will be here for an hour or two."

"I am compelled to differ with your ladyship. Unless I am greatly mistaken, yonder is Colonel Delacombe," said Hilary, pointing out a cavalier who had just entered the park, and was evidently shaping his course towards the mansion.

"You are right. 'Tis he!" she exclaimed.

"I have the honour to wish your ladyship good day."

"Why beat a retreat?" she cried. "Are you afraid of him?"

"Afraid! no!" exclaimed Hilary, proudly. "Colonel Delacombe has more reason than I have to avoid the meeting."

"Then stay and face him. Ha! he sees us. He is galloping in this direction."

It was now a point of honour with Hilary to remain.

Shortly afterwards the colonel came up, his looks proclaiming surprise and displeasure at the sight of her ladyship's companion.

Saluting her with his accustomed grace, he turned to Hilary, and said, sharply,

"You here, sir!"

Myrtila instantly interposed.

"Visit your displeasure upon me," she said. "I am the offender. Mr. St. Ives has remained here at my request."

"He should not have come here at all," rejoined the colonel. "He would have shown better taste by leaving the neighbourhood. I would recommend his prompt departure."

Myrtila again tried to interpose, but ineffectually.

Hilary's face flushed deeply. He met the colonel's look with a glance as stern as his own.

"I must ask Colonel Delacombe by what right he

presumes to question my taste, or to give me advice?" he said.

"It must suffice that I have expressed my opinion, sir," rejoined the colonel, haughtily.

"Pardon me, sir, that will not suffice," rejoined Hilary, boldly. "Why are you surprised to find me here? Why do you complain of my remaining in the neighbourhood? Above all, why do you enjoin my departure?"

"What have you to say to all this, colonel?" asked Myrtilla, who, it must be confessed, rather enjoyed his confusion. "If Mr. St. Ives has offended you, I am sure he will be ready to apologise."

"Your ladyship is very good to undertake his defence, but I bring no charge against him. I simply expressed surprise at seeing him here after the manner in which he had quitted Hazlemere."

"What manner?" cried Hilary, indignantly. "I left Hazlemere chiefly because I was given to understand by Mr. Radcliffe and Mr. Thornton that my presence—from some cause or other which you can best explain—is disagreeable to you. So far I have obeyed you. But I refuse to obey your mandate now, unless you can show that you have some right to exact obedience from me."

"Have you such right, colonel?" cried Myrtilla, laughing.

"I appeal to Mr. St. Ives's good taste and good feeling," said the colonel. "I hope he will see the impropriety of remaining in this neighbourhood—

especially after his own expressed determination—and I think a little reflection will convince him that I am right.”

“You are right, sir,” replied Hilary. “I confess that I have acted inconsiderately, and inconsistently with my own professions. I will go at once.”

And bowing to her ladyship, who sought by a look to restrain him, he departed.

“Upon my word, colonel, you have dealt harshly with the young man,” said her ladyship, in a reproachful tone.

“I am compelled to act thus. Don’t ask for an explanation. I cannot give it.”

“Well, look at this drawing. Pretty—ain’t it? Own that our young artist must be uncommonly clever to make such a sketch as this off-hand. I won’t say anything about myself—though I think I come out tolerably well—but my pet Azo is perfection.”

“Azo and his mistress are both excellently done,” said the colonel. “The fellow has undoubted talent.”

“I like the sketch so much that I mean to have it framed, and hang it up in my boudoir.”

“I was in hopes you were going to give it me. Won’t you?”

“No, thank you. If you want a copy, apply to the artist. I don’t mean to part with it. What do you think I gave for it?”

“Can’t say. It would be cheap at a guinea.”

“You shouldn’t have it for twenty. The gallant

young artist would take no other payment than one of my gloves."

"And you gave him your glove?" cried the colonel, frowning.

"Where was the harm? I thought it a romantic idea. Come, let us take a canter."

Away they went together at a swift pace down a long, sweeping glade, disturbing the deer, and then more slowly up the hill-side. By this time the colonel had recovered his temper, but he did not press his suit with the same ardour as heretofore. For nearly an hour they continued riding about the park, admiring its beauties, and the extensive views it commanded. But they saw nothing more of poor Hilary.

They then proceeded to the stables, where they remained until the arrival of the whole party from Hazlemere. Much to the colonel's relief, Mrs. Sutton did not accompany her mistress on this occasion. Lady Richborough, who was extremely proud of the sketch, took care it should be seen by everybody, and, of course, it was generally admired. But no one, except Sir Charles, made any inquiries about the artist. Curious to know what had passed between Hilary and the colonel, Mrs. Radcliffe questioned her ladyship in private, and after hearing the details of the interview, she could not help remarking, "I think the colonel behaves very badly to the young man."

"I gave him a hint to that effect," said her ladyship. "Pray what has Mr. St. Ives done to offend the colonel?"

"First, he was unlucky enough to be brought to Hazlemere. But that was not the poor fellow's own fault. I fear the colonel will never forgive him."

"But why need he care for the colonel's forgiveness? What is the colonel to him; or he to the colonel?"

"Don't ask me to give an opinion on that point."

"Well, all I can say is, that he would quite cut the colonel out in a drawing-room. I am sorry he is gone."

The interval between luncheon and dinner was spent in billiards and croquet. In the latter pleasant game Sir Charles was an expert, and luckily May was equally fond of it, and played equally well, so they were capitally matched.

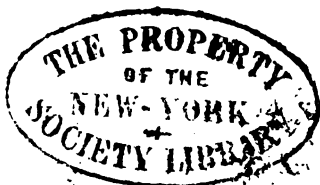
A croquet party, on a smooth lawn, with a tent close at hand, and a fine old mansion in the background, forms a pretty picture; and when two such charming personages as May and Myrtille figure among the players, the picture is prettier still. Both Sir Charles and Oswald were quite sorry when it was time to dress for dinner. Colonel Delacombe had never played at croquet before, but he profited by the instructions given him by her ladyship.

Sir Charles's cook being a cordon bleu the dinner was perfect. Mr. Dancer had special orders about the wine, and took particular care of Mr. Radcliffe and Mr. Thornton. Old Madeira and a bottle of Marshal Soult's sherry at dinner, with a magnum of Lafitte after, made them both superlatively happy.

After a little music, the whole party adjourned to the billiard-room to witness a match between Lady Richborough and the colonel, in which her ladyship came off the victor. Apparently, the colonel had quite forgotten the annoying incident of the morning, and seemed just as much enamoured as before.

To Sir Charles the day had been one of uninterrupted bliss.

END OF VOL. I.



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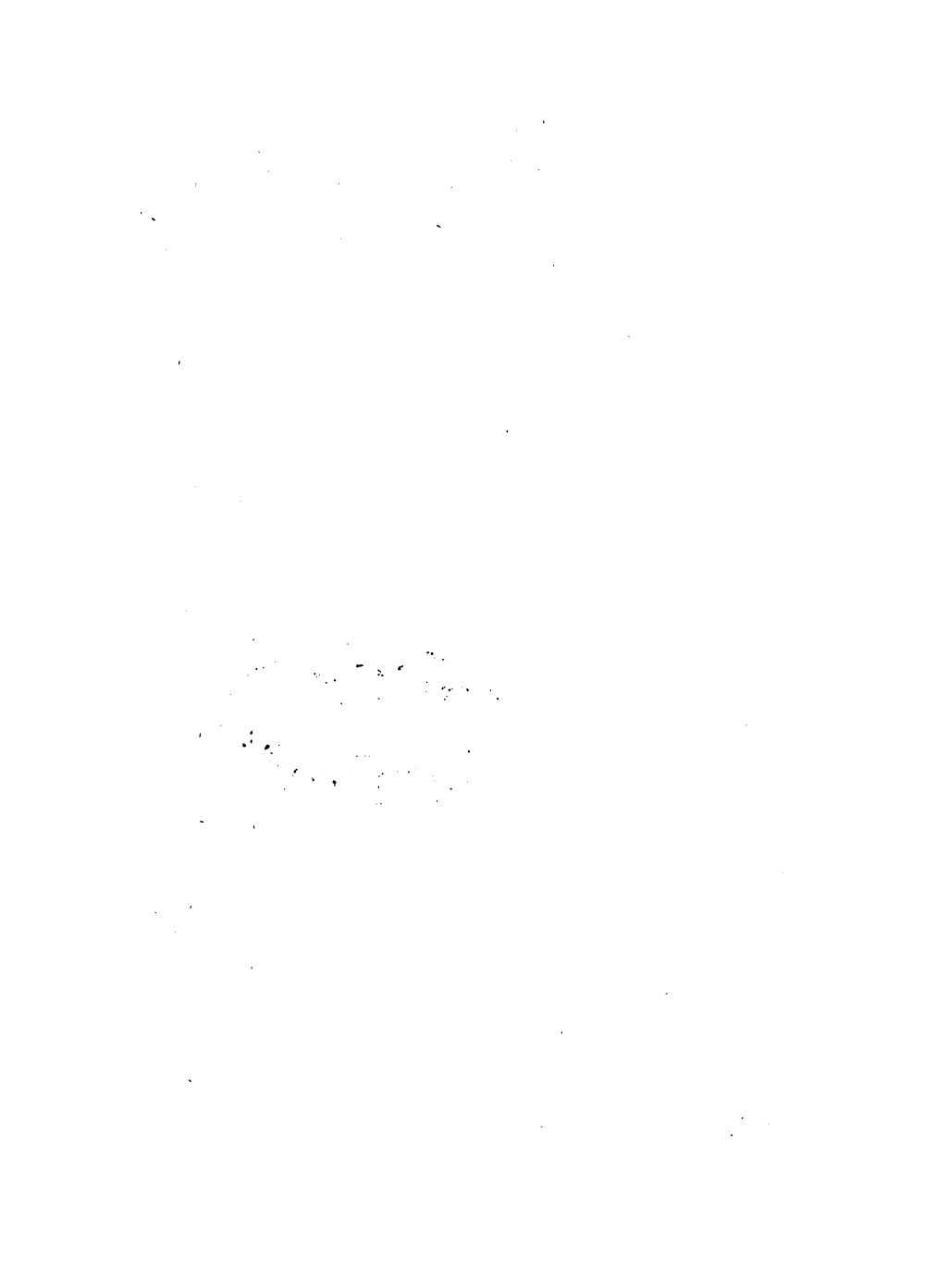
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IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.



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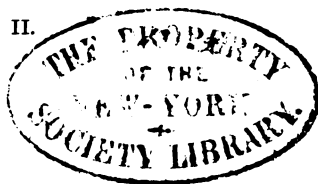
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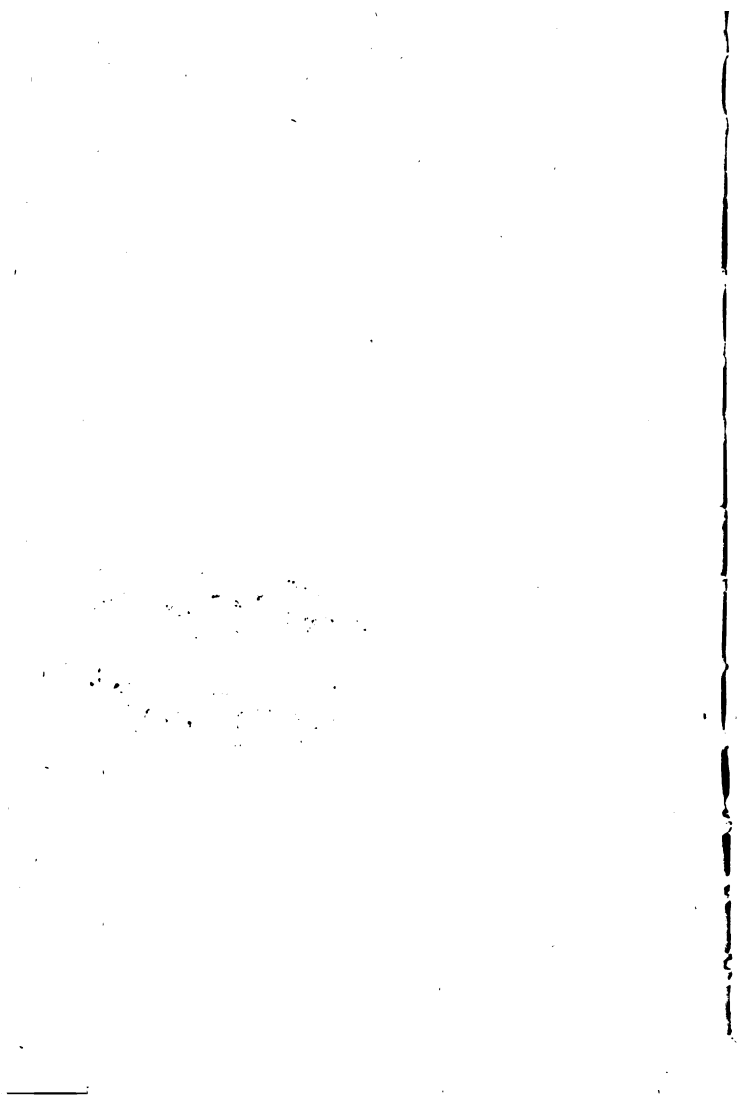
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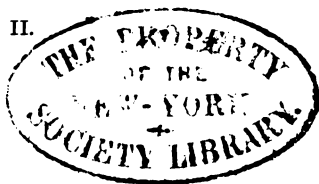
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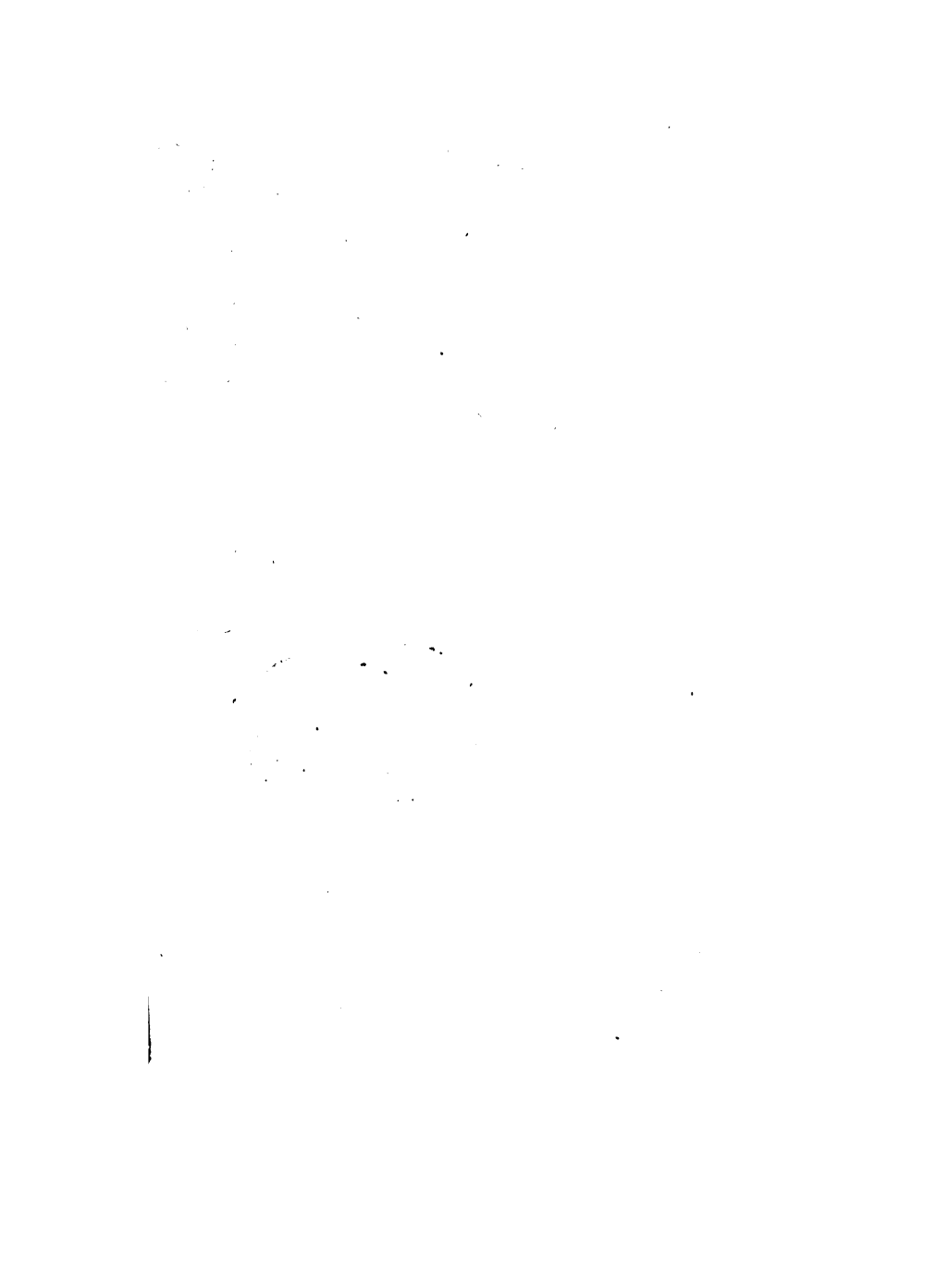
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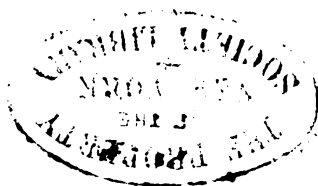
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HILARY ST. IVES.

BOOK II.

MYRTILLA.

(CONTINUED.)



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The Interview in Trafalgar-Square.

ALL went smoothly with the lovers. The skies were bright above them—their path was strewn with flowers. Not a quarrel has to be recorded. No untoward or unlooked-for event marred their happiness.

Sir Charles's love amounted to idolatry. Never happy, except in May's society—he was constantly by her side. Whether she was in the charming gardens of Hazlemere—at work in the drawing-room—on horseback in the shady lanes, or on the breezy common—whether she paced the stately terrace at Boxgrove—strolled forth into the park—or loitered amid the woods to admire the deer—Sir Charles was near her.

Sometimes, Myrtila was with them—but not always. They were so wrapped up in each other, that they had not a thought for her. She voted them both intensely stupid, and told them so. They only laughed, and gave small heed to what she said.

Ah! those were halcyon days. If such days would last, this earth would indeed be paradise.

But let us not disturb their happiness by any gloomy anticipations of the future. Fortunately for themselves, lovers never look beyond the present hour. Love is eternal, they believe, and will withstand the rudest

shock. Dream on, then, happy pair! We will not disturb you, or chase away your visions of delight.

Nearly a month passed away thus blissfully. Early and late, May and her lover were together. Neither had a plan with which the other was not connected. Each day, in Myrtilla's estimation, they grew more stupid than they had been the day before. She had no patience with Charlie, and would no longer listen to his rhapsodies. Impossible to live with them, if they went on in this manner. However, she consoled herself by thinking that they must soon come to their senses, since it was arranged that the marriage should take place early in July.

Sir Charles's engagement was vexatious to her ladyship in one respect. It detained her at Boxgrove longer than she liked. Her house in Eaton-place was prepared for her. The season had commenced. Lots of parties were going on—dinners, balls, fancy balls, musical soirées. Every post brought her cards of invitation, and notes from the nicest people imaginable, telling her she was sadly missed, and imploring her to come up to town without delay.

These notes drove her wild. She longed to be seen in the Park, where a host of admirers were on the look-out for her daily. She longed for the box at the Opera, with which Sir Charles had heretofore indulged her. She longed to see the Derby run, but that she knew to be impossible. However, she made up her mind to go to Ascot. She thought Boxgrove the dullest place on earth. Never had the gardens and

the park looked more exquisite. But what did she care for the gardens and the park when everybody was in town! She very much preferred Kensington Gardens and Hyde Park. She had promised Charlie to stay, and stay she would, if he insisted. But why not let her take May to Eaton-place? May had never yet had a season in town, and would enjoy a few weeks' gaiety immensely. She ought to go out a little before her marriage. Improvement was scarcely possible, but a month in town would give her the last finish.

Sir Charles shook his head, and entreated her not to mention the subject to May. So far from improving her, a month in town would take off the freshness which was so charming to him, and which, like the down on the peach, could never be restored.

Myrtilla laughed at his objections, and told him he was a selfish fellow, and wanted to keep May all to himself, but she promised compliance.

In spite, however, of her brother's interdiction, she *did* propose the plan to May, and held out so many inducements that, as she expected, the young girl was quite dazzled. On being consulted, Mrs. Radcliffe gave her assent, and could see nothing but what was delightful in the arrangement. Just the thing for May.

Unable to offer a remonstrance, Sir Charles reluctantly acquiesced. If he had a presentiment of ill, he kept it to himself.

So it was settled that her ladyship and May were to go up to Eaton-place, and arrangements were made accordingly.

Where was Colonel Delacombe all this while? Had he been rejected by Myrtilla, or given up all idea of her? Neither one nor the other. He was just as much enamoured as ever, but had not yet proposed. His visit to Hazlemere did not extend beyond the third day, when his attendance being required at the Horse Guards, he hastened up to town. He had accepted an invitation to Boxgrove, but was obliged to postpone it. At least, he pleaded a variety of unavoidable engagements. Mrs. Radcliffe also was very urgent for his return to Hazlemere. But he made the same excuses to her.

In fact, he was trying, though ineffectually, as it turned out, to conquer his passion for the fascinating Myrtilla.

Now that the colonel was gone, her ladyship, by way of amusing herself, would not have been indisposed to renew her flirtation with Oswald; but that disconsolate young fellow did not give her the opportunity, but started off rather suddenly for Bowdon, in Cheshire, where, it may be remembered, his mother resided, in order to obtain some solace under his bitter disappointment.

Mr. Thornton, however, was still at Hazlemere, and since a younger man was not to be had, her ladyship diverted herself by an occasional flirtation with him. The old gentleman was almost beside himself. No fool like an old fool.

Recent events had disturbed the calm tenor of Mrs. Radcliffe's existence, and she could not regain her

tranquillity. The colonel had promised to return immediately, but, as before mentioned, he did not keep his word. He wrote her a short apologetic note, the cold and distant tone of which she did not like at all. He was still at the Langham, and seemed well pleased with his quarters. Mr. Thornton, at his daughter's request, ran up to see him, but did not succeed in bringing him back.

Mrs. Sutton, too, was greatly changed. Her deportment was different from what it used to be, and at times she scarcely attempted to conceal the aversion she entertained for her mistress. Evidently, she could not forget the humiliation she had experienced from Colonel Delacombe. She could not endure to hear his name mentioned, and rudely checked her mistress whenever she alluded to him.

The housekeeper, however, manifested no reluctance to talk about Hilary St. Ives. Indeed, she often spoke of him, and with a tenderness and affection that surprised Mrs. Radcliffe. For reasons that need not be explained, she at once took possession of the five hundred pounds, and caused the clothes-chest, with all its contents, to be removed to her own chamber.

Had Mrs. Radcliffe seen her when she was alone that night, or overheard some ejaculations that escaped her, she would have been terrified. The expression of her countenance showed that she was under the empire of the worst passions.

All her machinations had come to naught. She had foolishly persuaded herself that by her influence

with the throng, she reached him. He was planted before a noble picture by Maclise, and was studying it so intently, that he did not perceive her. She touched his arm, and, as he turned, his looks betokened the greatest surprise.

Perhaps he would have avoided her, if he could—at least, such was her impression. But he did not refuse to attend her.

Quitting the picture galleries, they crossed the street and descended to the spacious inclosure of the square, where the fountains are wont to play, and where, comparatively speaking, they were alone.

As they paced to and fro, Mrs. Sutton commenced by expressing her great satisfaction at meeting with him, admitting that she had been in quest of him, and after chiding him for his sudden flight from Hazlemere, told him in the kindest terms she could employ, that she was still most anxious to serve him, and fondly hoped he would not decline her assistance.

"Do not think me ungrateful for the kindness you have shown me," he rejoined, "or for the interest you still take in me, but——"

"You are too proud to place yourself under an obligation to me. But a time may come when you may be less scrupulous. Pray let me know how I can communicate with you?"

He hesitated, but at last said,

"You must excuse me. I have reasons for withholding my address."

"You believe that I am acting for others. You

are wrong. I am personally interested in you—personally, I repeat. Do not disregard my friendship. I have the power and the will to serve you. In proof, let me tell you that it was I who sent the money and the clothes which you supposed came from Colonel Delacombe.”

“Then the letter I received was written by you?” he cried, in astonishment.

“It was. I adopted that roundabout course because I thought it would be most agreeable to your feelings. You will understand my motives better one of these days. Have I said enough to remove your scruples? I have the money with me, and entreat your acceptance of it—as a gift—as a loan.”

“I can only accept it on the condition of your giving me a full explanation of this seeming mystery. What am I to you that you take such interest in me?”

“What are you to me?” she cried, stopping, and regarding him with inexpressible tenderness.

She seemed about to pour forth the secrets of her heart, but suddenly checking herself, she added, “No—no—you must not ask me why I act thus. I cannot tell you.”

“You have said too much,” he exclaimed. “I have a right to further explanation.”

But Mrs. Sutton’s momentary weakness had passed.

“Be content with what you have learnt. Will you take the money?”

Hilary shook his head.

"I know from whom it comes," he rejoined. "You are employed by Mrs. Radcliffe. You act your part admirably. But you cannot impose upon me."

This was too much. Mrs. Sutton struggled hard with herself, but could not repress an outburst of emotion.

"You do me a great injustice," she ejaculated, in a broken voice. "But I forgive you. Farewell."

"Stay," he cried, detaining her. "Do not quit me in anger."

"In anger!" she exclaimed. "If you could read my heart you would find no anger there—but much grief."

Just then an elderly man descended the broad stone steps leading from the street, and walked slowly towards them. He had been watching them for some minutes from above, without attracting their attention. He was high-shouldered, and from his halting gait appeared to be lame. Though respectably dressed in black, he had not altogether the air of a gentleman.

"Who is that coming towards us?" cried Mrs. Sutton. "He seems to know you."

"Mr. Courtenay, of Exeter," replied Hilary. "He was to meet me at the Exhibition. I suppose he has seen me talking with you."

"Is that Mr. Courtenay?" she exclaimed, in alarm. "I must begone. For Heaven's sake do not tell him who I am. Write to me—write to me, I beseech you,

if you have any love for me. Attend to my caution. Farewell!"

And regardless of the construction that might be put upon her conduct, she hurried off to the lower part of the square.

whelmed by engagements. This might, perhaps, account for his inexplicable silence. Mrs. Radcliffe was willing to believe so, and quite recovered her spirits.

Mrs. Sutton was pleased with the arrangement. It suited her plans.

But May was greatly surprised by it. That mamma, who had never left home for years, and who had often declared that nothing should induce her to leave home again, should propose a visit to town, seemed the most unlikely thing possible. But unlikely things are just the things that always happen, as Myrtille told her. Of course May was delighted. Myrtille *said* she was delighted. And Sir Charles really *was* delighted. On all accounts, it rejoiced him that the family were going up to town.

May's *début* in fashionable society took place on the very night of her arrival in town, at Lady Oldcastle's ball at Prince's-gate, and created an extraordinary sensation. Everybody admitted that she was by far the loveliest girl that the season had as yet produced, and it did not seem at all likely that she could be eclipsed. Such charming features—such a delicately fair complexion—such soft blue eyes—such superb blonde tresses—and such an exquisite figure had never been seen before. And then she looked so fresh and unsophisticated—so full of natural enjoyment—that twenty blasé young fellows, proof against ordinary attractions, were smitten at first sight, and driven to despair when they learnt she was already engaged. All eyes followed her as she moved through the rooms,

and though there was some disposition to criticise her among mammas and chaperons jealous of their daughters' and charges' beauty, no real fault could be found with her. The worst that could be said was, that she was not quite accustomed to society. However, since no rivalry was to be expected from her, envy was silenced, and her surpassing loveliness universally admitted. Had she been in the market, the judgment pronounced upon her would have been very different. Her movements in the dance were so graceful that she caused a perfect *fureur*, and there was a host of aspirants for the honour of her hand. She liked dancing, and danced a good deal—almost every dance, we are afraid to say—and had the best partners in the room.

"You will fatigue yourself to death, my love," observed Lady Richborough. "You should follow my example, and never exceed a couple of vales. Recollect that you have three balls to-morrow night."

May was about to follow the advice, but her partner, who was no other than Captain de Vesci, Colonel Delacombe's friend, looked so blank and disappointed, that she took compassion upon him, and was instantly involved in the mazy ring.

"Lucky Sir Charles is not here," remarked her ladyship to Colonel Delacombe, who was seated beside her on a sofa in one of the smaller rooms. "I wonder what he would say to all this?"

"He would be charmed, of course, to see the object of his choice so much admired."

"I'm not so sure of that," said her ladyship, smil-

ing. "Sir Charles is of a remarkably jealous nature. If he could have his own way, I don't think he would let May go out at all."

"You amaze me!" cried the colonel. "I fancied he knew your sex better, and had more reliance on himself. Why should a woman, who is calculated to shine in society, be excluded from it? The plan never answers. I have known several young married people, who thought they could live for themselves alone, and were foolish enough to try the experiment. What was the result? Most of them, if not all, are now separated. If you want a woman to run away from you, shut her up. That's an infallible maxim. For my part," he continued, looking earnestly at her, in order to give due force to his words, "nothing would delight me so much as to see my wife admired. I should feel myself flattered by the compliments paid her."

"But how can you tell, colonel, since you have never been married?" observed her ladyship, archly.

"I can't speak practically. But I know myself sufficiently to be certain as to how I should be affected under such circumstances. Homage to my wife I should regard as homage to myself. If her charms and accomplishments excited admiration, I should feel proud of her, not jealous. Other people may covet the treasure I possess, but that would only make me value it the more. If we have a priceless gem, we do not hide it, but allow it to be seen, and the admiration it excites is in the highest degree gratifying to us. Such

would be my conduct towards my wife—if I had one.” And he again looked at her ladyship expressively.

“Your notions are strictly orthodox, colonel, and meet my entire approval,” rejoined her ladyship. “I wonder you do not give effect to them.”

“I have no chance of doing so. I am too fastidious to choose any other than a young and handsome woman, and such a woman would not be likely to accept an old scarred soldier like myself, while plenty of good-looking young fellows are to be had. I ought to have married long ago, but I have had no time to look out for a wife, and in India there is but little choice.”

“I am surprised at that. I should have thought just the contrary. But what prevents you from choosing now? There are pretty girls in abundance here.”

“A pretty girl would not suit me. I must have something brilliant.”

“A jewel such as you described just now?”

“Exactly.”

“That is not so easily found. Diamonds are not to be met with every day.”

“I have been singularly fortunate,” said the colonel. “I have discovered one of inestimable worth.”

Her ladyship was quite fluttered. She could not affect to misunderstand him.

But before anything more could be said by the colonel, a very unseasonable interruption was offered by a handsome, though rather effeminate-looking young man, with a pale complexion and light flowing whiskers,

who begged her ladyship, in drawling tones, to present him to Miss Radcliffe.

"Charming creature!" he cried. "Should like immensely to valse with her."

"No chance to-night, dear Lord Robert," she rejoined. "I know she's engaged four or five deep."

"Deuced unlucky that! Will your ladyship give me a galoppe?"

"Don't ask me, please. I'm tired. Besides, I want to take Miss Radcliffe away if I can."

"What, so early! and before she has fulfilled her engagements!" cried Lord Robert Tadcaster. "I must protest against such cruelty. Ah, here she comes!"

As he spoke May was brought back by Captain de Vesci. Lord Robert was presented, but May was unable to dance with him for the reasons assigned by Lady Richborough.

"Have you had enough, my love?" said her ladyship. "Recollect you are on your good behaviour to-night. Sir Charles will never forgive me if I allow you to remain out late."

"I am quite ready to go," said May. "But unluckily——"

"Never mind your engagements. They don't signify in the least. Lord Robert will give you his arm."

Attended by the colonel, and followed by May and the young nobleman, her ladyship then quitted the ball-room without taking leave of Lady Oldcastle.

Lady Richborough's box at the Opera was the

general resort of the golden youth of the day. It was full of them. Driven to the pit or to some other box, Sir Charles had the annoyance of witnessing the attentions paid his fiancée by a succession of impertinent coxcombs.

How often he wished himself back at Boxgrove! and how firmly he resolved that May should never have an opera-box.

But this was the slightest of his grievances. The same set of coxcombs who beset Lady Richborough's opera-box met her ladyship and May—as if by appointment—during their morning ride in Hyde Park, and would not be dismissed. They did not care for Sir Charles's black looks. Chief among these pests wore Lord Robert Tadcaster and Captain de Vesci. Sometimes, Sir Charles was exasperated to such a degree by their impertinences that he would have affronted them but for the interference of Colonel Delacombe.

The colonel, who was now recognised by Sir Charles as his sister's suitor, always attended her ladyship during her promenades, and indeed was generally with her in the evening as well as during the morning.

Seeing, or fancying they saw, how matters stood, people invited him to all the parties to which her ladyship was bidden. The colonel, therefore, was in immense request, and became extremely and deservedly popular. Attentions paid to her ladyship never put him out. He resigned his seat by her side without a

murmur, or fell back if a gay cavalier, whose chat he knew would amuse her, wanted to join her in Rottenrow. Thus it will be seen that he acted up to his own precepts, and would fain have instilled them into Sir Charles.

"Jealousy is an absurd passion," he said, "and always makes the person who yields to it ridiculous. Even if I were fool enough to be jealous, I would take good care not to let my wife perceive it. A woman always despises a jealous husband, and not unfrequently ends by giving him real ground for jealousy. Take my advice, and do not give yourself the slightest concern about these imbeciles. May is totally indifferent to them. She is amused by their bavardage, no doubt, but she rates them at their real worth. Do not make them of importance by quarrelling with any of them. Treat them as a pack of fools, and laugh at them as I do."

Very sensible advice. But Sir Charles could not follow it. He had many a severe trial to undergo, but one of the worst was at Ascot.

XIV.

Ascot.

LADY RICHBOROUGH, as we are aware, had resolved to go to Ascot. Sir Charles objected, but his objections were quickly overruled. The colonel, who had become a sort of Mentor to him, counselled him to give way with a good grace, and he did so. May said it was so kind of him. She longed, of all things, to go to Ascot, of which she had heard so much. New dresses were ordered—new bonnets—and all preparations made.

Mrs. Radcliffe no sooner heard of the plan than she determined to join the party. She had not witnessed a race for upwards of twenty years. At any risk she must go. So *she* ordered new dresses and new bonnets.

The party was further increased by Oswald and his mother, who had just come to town. Of the latter we must say a word. Mrs. Woodcot was not so handsome as her sister, but had very pleasing features, fine eyes, a very good figure, and very agreeable manners. Very well dressed, too, for a country lady.

Sir Charles made all necessary arrangements. He engaged rooms at the Castle Hotel, Windsor, for the whole party, which of course comprised the colonel and Mr. Thornton. Open carriages were at their dis-

posal, and in these they drove daily through the park to the racecourse. The weather being luckily propitious, nothing could be more enjoyable.

At all times the drive through this magnificent park is delightful, but in Ascot time it is peculiarly exhilarating. Every turn-out looks well. Teams bowl along merrily. Postilions appear conscious of their own importance. Everybody is well dressed and in high spirits.

Our friends were capitally turned out. Four splendid horses attached to each carriage bore them along gallantly. Lady Richborough and May, attended by Sir Charles and the colonel, occupied the first carriage. Both ladies looked ravishingly beautiful in their charming summer toilettes. May was full of excitement and delight—perfectly enchanted by the novel scene.

But the comparative quietude of the forest, with its long avenues, its grand old trees, and stretching glades, was soon exchanged for the crowd, confusion, and bewildering noises of the racecourse. What stoppages! what vociferations! what strange-looking people! But what excitement!

Mrs. Radcliffe, who came in the second carriage with Mrs. Woodcot, was quite terrified, half-screamed at every turn, and felt certain she should be upset. But both carriages got safely into the place reserved for them, which was the best place possible, being just opposite the Grand Stand. Then the poor lady could now look about her with comfort, and survey the surprising scene. She owned that it far surpassed

all her preconceived notions. And if she was astonished, what wonder that her daughter, to whom such a spectacle was an absolute novelty, should be greatly excited!

London had sent forth all its flower of fashion to the course. It had sent forth multitudes of others who had no pretension to rank or fashion, but still the aristocratic element was clearly perceptible in the crowd.

London had likewise sent forth all its beauty—or the best part of it. Hundreds of lovely women were to be seen in the long lines of carriages drawn up near the ropes. Hundreds of others, equally lovely, could be observed on the lawn and on the seats of the Grand Stand, looking in their gay attire, and with their wonderfully-varied parasols, like a vast parterre of flowers. But we unhesitatingly declare, that none so lovely could be discerned, either in the Grand Stand or elsewhere, as in the carriage containing Lady Richborough and May. This was proved by the universal admiration they excited.

To this sort of admiration Sir Charles could not object, and he was rather gratified by it—but he was very soon put out of humour.

The same set of coxcombs who had been his bane in Rotten-row, at the Opera, and at many an evening party, speedily discovered the carriage, and invaded it. There they were monopolising May, laughing, jesting in the most impertinently familiar manner, talking about the horses, and offering bets of gloves.

In order to get rid of his tormentors, Sir Charles proposed that the ladies should go over to the Grand Stand, and take possession of their box. Agreed to. But the plaguy fellows were not to be shaken off. Lord Robert Tadcaster immediately offered his arm to May, and De Vesci insisted upon escorting Myrtille.

"Confound their impertinence!" cried Sir Charles. "I can't stand it any longer."

"It is a bore," rejoined the colonel. "But pray keep quiet."

We shall pass by what happened in the Grand Stand. Sir Charles's temper was certainly not improved. After the race for the Gold Cup had been run, they returned to the carriage for luncheon, and the same sort of thing occurred again—a degree worse, perhaps. Sir Charles and the colonel were both excluded from the carriage, and their seats occupied by the odious De Vesci, and the still more odious Lord Robert, who laughed and chatted with the ladies, while they quaffed the iced champagne and helped to demolish the lobster salad and pigeon pie. Sir Charles was so disgusted that he went to have luncheon with Mrs. Radcliffe, and the colonel went with him.

They had not been gone many minutes when a very tawny, but handsome gipsy made her way to the carriage, and fixing her black eyes on May, addressed her in the customary formula,

"Let me tell you your fortune, my pretty young lady."

"Yes, do let her tell it you, Miss Radcliffe," cried

Lord Robert, slipping a sovereign into the gipsy's hand. "I long so much to hear it. I wonder whether she'll tell it right."

"My words will come true for sartin," rejoined the gipsy, confidently. "But no one but the young lady must hear 'em. Let me look at your hand, my pretty lady."

After a moment's inspection of May's white palm, she whispered in the young lady's ear, "Look over my shoulder, my dear—look straight afore you."

May complied, and perceived amidst the crowd, on the further side of the ropes, a tall young man, who was watching the scene. She could not mistake him. It was Hilary St. Ives.

"That's him as you are to marry," said the gipsy, in the same low tone as before.

XV.

Mrs. Sutton's Interview with Lady Richborough.

AFTER uttering her strange prediction, the gipsy hurried away, refusing to satisfy Lord Robert's curiosity, which was greatly excited by May's blushes and confusion. The cunning fortune-teller had spoken in so low a tone that he could not catch a word she said.

When May looked up again, Hilary had disappeared, and she saw no more of him during the day.

Though quite as curious as Lord Robert to learn what had occurred, Lady Richborough made no remark at the time, but when she and May were alone together in the evening, she questioned her on the subject, and laughed heartily at the explanation.

"Oh! that is all," she exclaimed. "I fancied the gipsy had promised you to Lord Robert, for I saw him bribe her, but I suppose she was better paid by Hilary St. Ives. So you are to marry him, eh? I wouldn't give much for his chance, notwithstanding the prophecy."

"Nor I. But you must own it is a strange circumstance," observed May.

"Not so strange as it appears. The gipsy was in league with Hilary, who told her what to say, and placed himself where he could be readily descried. I

am glad you did not mention the matter to Sir Charles. It would only have put him out."

"Poor fellow! I fear he was greatly put out before that. Dearest Myrtila, I cannot persevere in the part you have forced me to play, now that I find how much it pains him. Do give that tiresome Lord Robert a hint, or allow me to do so."

"Not yet, my love—not yet, or you will defeat my plan. Sir Charles must and shall be cured of his jealousy."

"But is this the way to cure him? I constantly expect to see him break out into a furious passion."

"Just what I want," said her ladyship, smiling. "Then we will make him heartily ashamed of himself, and his cure will be accomplished."

"But if he is no longer jealous, I shall think he no longer loves me."

"My dear child, it is a mistake to suppose that a jealous man is the most devoted. He is simply intensely selfish and exacting. Sir Charles entertains the preposterous notion, of which I intend to disabuse him, that he is to have you all to himself. Were he allowed his own way, he would exclude you altogether from society, and shut you up at Boxgrove, where you would be as dull as if you were immured in a convent."

"It would be no punishment to me to be shut up, as you term it, at Boxgrove. Indeed, I should prefer it to the rackets life I am now leading. You will laugh at me, I know, Myrtila, but I declare I am not half so

happy as I used to be when rambling daily about the park with dear Sir Charles. How things have altered since we came to town! When we ride out together in Rotten-row, Sir Charles's place is immediately taken by some one whom he dislikes. Very often we do not exchange more than half a dozen words during a whole evening. I find it very hard to obey your instructions. Sir Charles, as you know, doesn't dance, and I am sure—though he never says so—that he thinks I dance a great deal too much. My conduct must appear shocking to him, and though you find plenty of excuses for me, I can find none for myself."

"Having put yourself in my hands, you must do as you are bidden. By-and-by, when you understand things better, you will be grateful for my good advice. Mrs. Radcliffe entirely approves of the plan I am pursuing, and is infinitely obliged to me. She sees as plainly as I do that Sir Charles's design is to keep you in the country. Now I won't have such a charming creature buried alive to please him. You are formed for society, and shall not be withdrawn from it with my consent. As May Radcliffe, you are immensely admired, but you will be ten times more admired as Lady Ilminster. I know from experience the effect that a lovely young married woman of a certain rank can produce. She carries all before her. Every house worth entering is thrown open to her. She is queen of every fête, and a hundred soupirants follow in her train."

"A brilliant picture," observed May, smiling. "But

it does not dazzle me. I must repeat that I am unequal to the part I am playing. I was really unhappy this morning when Sir Charles left the carriage, and would have recalled him if I could. I thought Lord Robert perfectly detestable, and wished him at Jericho, or anywhere else, except Ascot."

"He has been very useful to us in our little plot," observed her ladyship. "You need not give yourself the least concern about a butterfly that can be brushed off at any moment."

They then separated for the night. May was tired, but sleep did not visit her so soon as it used to do, when she was better satisfied with herself.

Things went on pretty much as they had done for another fortnight. Morning fêtes, concerts, grand dinners, and grander balls succeeded each other without interruption, and at all these Lady Richborough and May assisted.

Apparently, Sir Charles was more reconciled to his position, and allowed no outward manifestation of annoyance to escape him. In fact, he appeared indifferent—though this was far from being the case. Had he become philosophical? Or had he penetrated his sister's design? Myrtila triumphantly declared that they had brought him to his senses; but May's uneasiness increased, and she began seriously to apprehend that she had lost his affections.

Meantime, the business arrangements connected with the approaching nuptials had been going on quietly and satisfactorily. Settlements—those dangerous rocks upon

which so many fair barks bound for the matrimonial haven have split—offered no difficulties in this case. All was plain sailing. Sir Charles had announced his intention of settling five thousand a year upon his intended, and his estates were to be charged to that amount. Not to be behindhand in liberality, Mr. Radcliffe agreed to settle another five thousand a year upon his daughter. These arrangements were entrusted to Mr. Thornton, who acted as professional adviser to both parties, and declared he had never been more agreeably employed.

When the deeds were completed, and only lacked the necessary signatures, he told May with a chuckle, that she would soon have ten thousand a year. "And a very nice little income you will find it," he added. "Don't forget that you owe it to grandpapa."

As Colonel Delacombe seemed quite at home at Eaton-place, as he was consulted on all matters by Lady Richborough, and occasionally did the honours for her, it is not surprising Mrs. Radcliffe should conclude they were engaged, but she could not get either of them to admit that they were so. The colonel always laughed when rallied on the subject, and declared she did him too much honour. On one point Mrs. Radcliffe was perfectly satisfied. She could not, she was convinced, have found a better chaperon for her daughter than Lady Richborough. May's triumph's delighted her, and recalled the days when she herself had been universally admired. Moreover, she entirely agreed with her ladyship that Sir Charles must be

cured of his absurd jealousy. A different opinion, however, prevailed among the rest of the family. Mr. Radcliffe and Mr. Thornton thought May's conduct very foolish, and were both apprehensive lest Sir Charles should break off the match.

Mrs. Radcliffe, it will be seen, did not enjoy her visit to town. Under the circumstances, it was impossible she could do so. She had calculated upon the colonel's attentions, and though provoked by his neglect was compelled to dissemble her rage and disappointment. She was also obliged to put on a mask of friendship for Lady Richborough, whom she detested.

Of late, as we know, she had ceased to impart her griefs to Mrs. Sutton, because she met with little sympathy from her; but one day, being greatly exasperated, she could not help observing to the housekeeper that she felt certain the colonel was about to marry Lady Richborough.

"I do not think the marriage will take place," observed Mrs. Sutton, with a singular smile.

"Why not?" demanded Mrs. Radcliffe, curiously.

"I have my own reasons for thinking so," replied the other.

"Whatever your reasons may be, you are entirely wrong, Sutton," said her mistress. "I can no longer delude myself with the notion that Seymour is a model of constancy. He is faithless as the rest of his sex. He has contrived to captivate Lady Richborough, and she has accepted him."

"Do you only suspect this?" said the housekeeper, looking at her inquiringly; "or are you sure?"

"I have not questioned her ladyship on the subject, Sutton, but her manner towards Seymour satisfies me of the correctness of my surmise. Perfidious wretch! I could kill him."

"*You* kill him!" exclaimed the housekeeper, scornfully. "You have not the courage to do it."

"Well, perhaps I have not," observed Mrs. Radcliffe. "I have not the resolution of a Spanish or Italian woman. But I should have no compunction in breaking off the match if I had the power."

The housekeeper smiled bitterly, and said,
"I know a way to prevent it."

Mrs. Radcliffe looked at her incredulously.

"Entreaties are ineffectual with Seymour, I have tried them. He is immovable."

"Wait till I have had an interview with Lady Richborough, and you will then see whether he will persist."

"We must consider before you take this step, Sutton."

"No consideration is required. For Lady Richborough's sake the step *must* be taken, and without delay."

Next morning, at a tolerably early hour, Mrs. Sutton repaired to Eaton-place, and after a little delay was shown into Lady Richborough's dressing-room. Her ladyship had just finished her toilette, and professing

to be delighted to see the housekeeper, begged her to be seated.

Without allowing Mrs. Sutton to enter upon her business, she gave her a very lively description of the balls at which she and May had been present on the previous nights, and would have gone on much longer in the same strain had she not perceived that the housekeeper was becoming impatient. She then stopped suddenly, and said,

"I suppose you bring me some message from dear Mrs. Radcliffe?"

"No. I have taken the liberty of waiting upon your ladyship at this early hour because I have something important—very important to yourself—to communicate."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Lady Richborough, rather alarmed by her manner.

"I must prepare your ladyship for a disagreeable, and perhaps painful piece of intelligence," pursued Mrs. Sutton. "The disclosure I am about to make is calculated to destroy many agreeable illusions, but it cannot be withheld."

"In Heaven's name, what is it? Don't put me on the rack."

"Before entering into any explanation, I must venture to ask your ladyship a question to which I trust you will not refuse me a precise answer. Is there any truth in the report that you are about to be united to Colonel Delacombe?"

"I now see your errand, Sutton," cried her lady-

ship, laughing. "Though you deny it, I am sure you have been sent by Mrs. Radcliffe to put that question to me."

"Your ladyship is quite mistaken. No one has sent me. No one is aware of my visit. No one will hear of it from me. If you will give me an assurance that an engagement does not subsist between you and Colonel Delacombe nothing more need be said."

"As I cannot exactly give you such an assurance, Sutton, you must assume what you please."

"Then I am bound to tell your ladyship that if such a marriage is contemplated, it can never take place."

Myrtila turned excessively pale, and after a moment's silence, said,

"What do you mean, Sutton? Is there any serious impediment?"

Laying her hand upon her ladyship's arm, and fixing her eyes full upon her, the housekeeper said in a low voice:

"An insuperable impediment. He is already married."

Myrtila uttered an exclamation of surprise and anger. Shaking off the housekeeper's grasp, she cried, with great indignation,

"Nonsense, Sutton! I won't believe it. Is it likely that Colonel Delacombe—a man of unquestionable honour—would, if he were married, pay his addresses to a lady, and seek to obtain her hand? I can guess

the author of the calumny. Tell her I disbelieve it and despise it."

"Again I must set your ladyship right," rejoined Mrs. Sutton, calmly. "I alone am responsible for the statement, and I affirm its truth."

Her manner carried conviction with it, and frightened Lady Richborough.

"If necessary, I am prepared to substantiate my assertion," continued Mrs. Sutton, after a pause. "But Colonel Delacombe will not dare to deny the accusation."

"We shall see," cried Lady Richborough. "Oh! Sutton, you have made me wretched—most wretched."

"Better your ladyship should suffer now than later on, when the error would be irreparable."

"Yes, if what you say is true, you have indeed saved me from a terrible fate. But since you have said so much, you must tell me all. Where is his wife? What is she? Why has he separated from her?"

"Your ladyship must not question me further," rejoined the housekeeper, in a troubled tone. "I have told you all that is necessary. Thus much I will say. It was a most unlucky union, and attended with sad consequences."

"Has he abandoned his wife?"

"Ask him. Perhaps he may tell you. I cannot. It is a very painful history. Nor should any allusion have been made to it but for present circumstances. My errand is done. I wish your ladyship good morning."

"Stay!" cried Myrtila, detaining her. "A strange suspicion crosses me. Pray satisfy my doubts."

"I must again refer you to the colonel," rejoined Mrs. Sutton, evasively. "I have nothing more to disclose. You are now in possession of his secret, and can use it as you please."

XVI.

The Colonel's Explanation.

LADY RICHBOROUGH would not see the colonel that day. She feigned sudden indisposition, and kept her own room. Her first idea was to consult with Sir Charles, and leave him to take such steps as he might deem advisable in a matter so delicate, but having still some doubts as to the truth of the housekeeper's statement, she resolved—after long deliberation—to question the colonel herself.

Of course—in consequence of her ladyship's supposed illness—all the arrangements for the day had to be given up. The troop of young men who expected to join the fair equestrians in Rotten-row were doomed to disappointment. The Opera was a blank, since the pleasantest box in the house was empty that night. Lady Fitton had to fill up two places at her dinner, and Lady Louisa Legge's ball was deprived of its chief attractions.

Mrs. Radcliffe, who had heard of the housekeeper's visit, called in Eaton-place, and hearing that her ladyship was indisposed, expressed great anxiety to see her, but was not admitted to her room.

Quite unaware of the thunder-cloud hanging over his head, Colonel Delacombe came as usual, and was

sorry to hear of her ladyship's illness, but any uneasiness he might have felt was dispelled by May, who told him that Myrtilla was only suffering from fatigue, and would be perfectly restored after a few hours' rest. Satisfied with this assurance, he gave himself no further concern, but proceeded to his club.

Next morning, when he again presented himself in Eaton-place, he learnt that her ladyship was better, and was at once shown to her boudoir. He could not perceive any traces of illness in her countenance, but, on the contrary, thought her looking remarkably well, and told her so. She was writing a letter, and begged him to excuse her for a moment while she finished it. This gave her time to arrange her ideas.

When she addressed him, he saw in a moment that something was wrong. She did not waste time in any preliminary remarks, but said,

"In consequence of a communication made to me yesterday by Mrs. Sutton—the nature of which you will easily guess—I had resolved not to see you again, but to leave Sir Charles to acquaint you with my determination, together with my reasons for it, but——"

"I am exceedingly glad you did not do so, Myrtilla," he interrupted. "What has Mrs. Sutton told you?"

Myrtilla hesitated, and the colour fled from her cheeks.

"If what she says is true, you have no right to pay your addresses to me or to any other lady. She affirms that you are already married. Can you give me

your word of honour that there is no truth whatever in her statement?"

"No," he replied in a sombre tone, "I cannot do that."

"Then you admit the charge?"

"Certainly not."

"How am I to reconcile these contradictions?"

"Listen to me, Myrtille. The disclosure I am about to make has been delayed too long—but on my honour I intended to make it. How the secret, which I thought confined to my own breast, has come to Mrs. Sutton's knowledge I do not pretend to guess. It is certain that she has learnt it, and now uses it for her own vindictive purposes. I will be as brief in my narration as I can, and I beg you not to interrupt me. When I first entered the army, and had little or no experience of your sex, I was entrapped into a marriage with an artful woman. I do not attempt to extenuate my conduct. All the reproaches you could heap upon me would not equal the reproaches I have heaped upon myself. I was mad—that is my sole excuse. I soon discovered how completely I had been duped. The perfidious wretch, with whom I had unfortunately connected myself, did not love me—did not even respect my honour. She had basely deceived me. Before I married her, she had a lover—and ere long, as I subsequently ascertained, she renewed her intimacy with him, if she had ever discontinued it. These particulars must shock you, but I cannot withhold them. They are necessary for my justification.

The woman's temper was frightful. At times she was a perfect fiend—a terror to her mother, with whom she lived—and I confess that I myself was afraid of her, for, in her transports of fury, my life was not safe. Upon one occasion, indeed, she snatched up a knife, and would have stabbed me if I had not wrested the weapon from her. It is scarcely necessary to say that the degrading alliance I had formed was kept secret. It was not even known to my intimates. However, I was not troubled with her long. When I went to Ireland with my regiment, I left her with her mother. She expressed no desire to accompany me—probably, for the reasons I have already given. I had no correspondence with her, and heard nothing of her for months. I then only learnt her fate from a newspaper.”

“What was her fate?” demanded Myrtilla, who had listened with deep interest to his recital.

“She was drowned with her paramour while crossing the Severn during a gale. The ferry-boat was upset, and all on board perished. Justice overtook her. She had deserted her mother, whose heart was broken by her misconduct, and who died soon afterwards. Can you wonder that I should desire to bury such a deplorable history in oblivion? Long years have passed since the events took place, but the recollection of them still gives me great pain.”

“Was it clearly ascertained that the misguided woman perished?”

“Undoubtedly. It was known that she and her

lover embarked in the ferry-boat on that fatal night, and not a soul was saved."

There was a pause for some moments. At last, Myrtilla spoke:

"Seymour, I fear she still lives—lives to plague you in the form of Mrs. Sutton."

The colonel's brow darkened.

"I cannot hope to convince you," he rejoined, in a sombre tone. "Think what you please. But say no more on the subject."

"Do not be angry with me. Right or wrong, I will stand by you, and acting thus together, we shall prove more than a match for Mrs. Sutton."

"She can do me no injury except through you, Myrtilla. She is in my power, and if she provokes me further she shall feel that she is so."

"Take care you do not place yourself in *her* power, Seymour, or she will show you little pity. Marriage between us, under present circumstances, is of course out of the question; but I shall continue our friendly relations, if only to vex Mrs. Sutton. She shall not have the gratification of thinking she has produced a rupture."

"I swear to you, Myrtilla, you are mistaken——"

"Do not forswear yourself, Seymour. You will fail to convince me, unless you can prove that the Severn has not parted with its prey, which I think you will find rather difficult. But I will not give the vindictive woman a triumph. That is all I can promise you. One more question, and I have done. Answer it or

not, as you please, but answer truly. Who is Hilary St. Ives?"

"Who is he?"

"Was there issue of your ill-starred marriage?"

The colonel made no reply.

"If there was, this young man is your son. I have thought so all along. Have you ever made any inquiries about him?"

"No. I take no interest in him. Even if your suspicions are correct—and there is nothing to warrant them—I will never acknowledge him. It may seem a harsh determination—but having formed it, I shall abide by it."

Just then the door opened, and Mrs. Radcliffe came in, accompanied by May.

XVII.

A Discussion upon Balls and what it led to.

No one could have supposed from Mrs. Radcliffe's manner that she entertained any secret feeling of dislike to Myrtila, or was otherwise than pleased at her recovery. Yet, if her heart had been searched, it would have appeared that she was vexed at seeing her rival look so well, and still more provoked to find her on as good terms as ever with the colonel. Naturally, she had attributed Myrtila's sudden illness to the effect of Mrs. Sutton's communication. But if a quarrel had been caused, a reconciliation must have taken place, and consequently the mischief was undone.

Myrtila discerned what was passing in the other's breast, and was malicious enough to heighten her annoyance.

Shortly afterwards, Sir Charles came in, and expressed his satisfaction at finding his sister all right again.

"You were terribly missed yesterday, Myrtila, I can tell you," he said. "Your squires in Rotten-row were in despair at your non-appearance with May, and there was universal lamentation at the Opera. I did not go to Lady Louisa Legge's ball, but I hear it was considered a failure owing to your absence."

"Very flattering to us," remarked her ladyship,

smiling. "We shall reappear with additional éclat at Mrs. Baldwin Lanyon's rout to-night. I insist upon your going with us, Charlie."

Sir Charles shook his head.

"No more balls for me," he remarked. "I am heartily sick of them. I went to bed early last night, and am all the better for it. You don't want me, May. I never dance, and you have no end of partners."

"Very well, sir, then we must do without you," cried Myrtilla. "But you will lose a very charming party. I dare say you would very much prefer a quiet evening at Boxgrove."

"Infinitely. I find no pleasure in crowded and stifling rooms, and there is nothing in the society one meets to compensate for the annoyance one is sure to experience."

"If such is your opinion, Charlie, you are quite out of place in a ball-room, and much better in bed," said her ladyship. "But to my mind there is nothing so delightful as a crowded ball—crowded I mean by nice people, such as we are sure to meet to-night at the Baldwin Lanyons'. Whatever you may aver to the contrary, girls are never seen to such advantage as in a ball-room, and certainly there is no other kind of réunion that they enjoy so much. Isn't it true, May?"

The young lady appealed to made no reply. But Mrs. Radcliffe smiled assent.

"It used to be so in my time," she remarked.

"At no other sort of party can flirting be carried on to such an extent," observed Sir Charles, dryly;

"and that I fancy is the grand recommendation of a ball."

"We all like to flirt a little at a ball or elsewhere," laughed Myrtilla; "and so do you in your quiet way, Charlie. Rail as much as you please against balls, pouncing people will always enjoy them."

"To be sure they will," said Mrs. Radcliffe. "My health will not permit me to go out now; but there was a time when I liked nothing so much as a ball."

"And were as much admired as your daughter, as I can bear witness," observed the colonel. "Sir Charles must be jesting. I never heard him advance such monstrous opinions before."

"You mistake my meaning," observed Sir Charles. "A ball now and then is delightful, but there may be too much of a good thing. To go out night after night—to meet the same crowds—to dance with the same triflers—to listen to the same vapid nonsense—appears to me a sad waste of existence."

This tirade was received with a loud burst of laughter from everybody but May.

"How we differ!" cried Myrtilla. "To me a ball looks like enchantment. I like the atmosphere and excitement, the lights, the music, the crowd, the talk, the dancing—everything."

"Especially the flirting," remarked her brother.

"Well, what do girls go to a ball for; except to flirt, as you call it? Most of them go with the expectation of finding husbands, and some of them succeed in their design. Necessarily, if they are pretty,

they are admired, and men will flatter them—will talk nonsense to them. If they laugh and are amused, you call that flirting.”

“But I hold it impossible that a girl of any sense can be amused by the frivolities and attentions of the same empty coxcombs,” cried Sir Charles. “She may tolerate them for an occasion, but night after night to surround herself with the same set of idiots argues a very coquettish disposition.”

“Well, then, I proclaim myself a coquette—a heartless coquette, if you please,” cried Myrtila. “I *do* like admiration—I *do* like to be surrounded by a throng of empty-headed coxcombs, vieing with each other for the honour of dancing with me. It diverts me to listen to their nonsense, and it enchants me to make them jealous of each other. And I will tell you why, Charlie. A man never looks so supremely ridiculous as when he is jealous.”

“None but a fool can be jealous of a coquette. To be jealous of a woman you must love her, and when you see her bestow her smiles on every one who comes near her, the love you have felt will soon be extinguished.”

“There I differ with you,” said the colonel. “Our passions are not so much under our control that we can conquer them in a moment. A coquette may vex and annoy us, but we cannot cease to love her.”

“Well, we have had a very long discussion upon balls,” remarked Myrtila. “But, in spite of all that

Sir Charles has said, I shall go to Mrs. Lanyon's rout to-night. How say you, May?"

"You must excuse me," she rejoined.

"Why, surely you won't let Sir Charles's silly opinions influence you?"

"I had made up my mind not to go before he said a word—but I quite agree with him. I am tired of balls."

"Are these your real sentiments, May?" cried Sir Charles, in surprise.

"Myrtila will tell you that it is not the first time I have expressed them," she rejoined.

"Yes, since you are foolish enough to make this confession, I must confirm its truth," replied her ladyship. "I make no doubt it will gratify you to learn, Charlie, that the silly creature, finding you disliked balls, and were anything but gratified—as you ought to have been—to see her so much admired, and so much sought after, would have withdrawn from society altogether, if I would have allowed her. But I would not hear of such a thing. I thought—and still think—that you are bound to sacrifice your own inclinations to her's, and that it is very selfish of you to interfere with her enjoyment."

"But I have not found the enjoyment you led me to expect in this perpetual round of gaiety, Myrtila," said May; "while, as you are aware, the attentions paid me have been as annoying to me as to Sir Charles.

Forced to contrast my former happy life with that I have been leading of late, I am satisfied that my tastes are extremely simple—that the country suits me far better than town—and that I am not at all cut out to be a fine lady.”

Sir Charles uttered a cry of delight.

“You are the most charming creature on earth,” he exclaimed, flying towards her, and taking her hand, which he pressed to his heart, “and have dispelled every doubt I entertained.”

“I know you thought me changed, dear Sir Charles,” she said, regarding him affectionately; “but indeed—indeed—I am not so. I have played a foolish part, but if you knew how much I have suffered in acting it you would forgive me. I am still the same May as ever.”

“Don’t say any more, I beg of you, my love,” cried Myrtila. “You will totally spoil him. I hope he won’t be so barbarous as to take you at your word.”

“My desire is to return to Hazlemere immediately, if I am not interfering with mamma’s plans,” said May. “I shall ever feel obliged by your kindness to me, Myrtila, but I have had enough of gaiety.”

“Under the circumstances, I think you have come to a very wise determination, my dear,” remarked Mrs. Radcliffe. “You are bound to consult Sir Charles’s wishes on all points. However, you had better remain in town for a few days longer, as your sudden departure might cause disagreeable comments.”

"If I remain I shall not go to another ball. People may say what they please."

"Well, I will make the best excuses I can for you," remarked Myrtilla. "But I must keep *my* engagements. What am I to say to Lord Robert, and the rest of your admirers?"

"Bid them go hang themselves," cried Sir Charles.

"They are very likely to do it when they hear of May's departure," laughed the colonel. "You will have a great deal to answer for, Sir Charles. Society will not easily forgive you for depriving it of its chief attraction."

"I am too happy to care what it thinks," cried the other, pressing May's hand.

That very morning May removed from Eaton-place to Upper Brook-street.

Thenceforward, she and Sir Charles were almost as much together as they had previously been in the country, and she declared with perfect sincerity that her last three days in town were the pleasantest she had spent there. There was plenty to do, for as the wedding-day was not far off, the trousseau had to be ordered, and other necessary arrangements made. These afforded delightful occupation to Mrs. Radcliffe, who liked nothing so much as a consultation with a modiste. It may interest our fair readers to learn that May received a profusion of handsome presents. Every day brought her a beautiful piece of jewellery. A new chariot had been ordered, and after she had inspected it, it was sent down to Boxgrove. Thither Sir Charles

prepared to follow, while the others got ready for their return to Hazlemere.

Their last day in town was devoted to the Crysta Palace, where grandpapa gave a capital dinner, as will be learnt in the next chapter.

XVIII.

At the Crystal Palace.

AFTER all, there is no place near London more enjoyable than the Crystal Palace. We cannot for a moment compare the gardens and grounds with those of the regal palace of Versailles. There is no grandeur about the enormous conservatory crowning Sydenham Hill, but it has a light and cheerful aspect, which a more solid structure in such a situation, and built with a similar object, could not offer. Its terraces, though wide, are not stately—but they do very well for a promenade. Its lawns, which are its prettiest feature, are smooth and well kept, but then you are not allowed to walk upon them. It has abundance of shrubberies, plantations, flower-beds, and pavilions; it has many statues in plaster, which we do not admire, and it commands a magnificent and extensive view which every one *must* admire, when it is not obscured by fog; but it has no charming parterres like those of Versailles—no bosquets—no long shady alleys—no quincunxes—no tapis vert—no basin of Latona—no salle de bal—and above all, no fountain of Neptune.

Still, its fountains, though wanting in the rich sculpture of those of Versailles, answer their purpose, and when in full play present a very striking spectacle.

What with its various attractions, inside and out,

the Crystal Palace constitutes, as we have said, the best place of amusement to be found near the metropolis. Naturally, it is the favourite resort of foreigners, who find in the beautiful gardens and in the vast bazaar connected with them, more to suit their tastes than anywhere else in London. Where are there such fêtes as those of Sydenham?—where such concerts?—where such fireworks? The glories of extinct Vauxhall pale before the modern pyrotechnic displays, and their wonderful accompaniments. Nothing can be finer than the illuminated fountains.

But it is not our purpose to particularise the numerous and varied attractions of the Crystal Palace. We are not about to describe its courts and galleries. All our readers must be familiar with them. Everybody, however, may not know how well you can dine there. We do not speak of the general refreshment-rooms, of which we know nothing; but we refer to the private dining-rooms, where you can get a far better dinner and far better wines, than at the renowned Hôtel des Reservoirs at Versailles—and that is saying a good deal.

Of this fact our worthy friend Mr. Thornton had been made aware. The old gentleman had already entertained the family party at Richmond and Greenwich, and had got a capital dinner at either place, but as the Radcliffes' visit to town was drawing to a close, he resolved to wind up with a dinner at the Crystal Palace, which, if possible, should surpass the others. Accordingly he secured a room and held a consulta-

tion with the representative of Messrs. Bertram and Roberts, who promised to carry out his intentions efficiently, and to give him a most *recherché* dinner—whitebait and fish as good as he had eaten at Greenwich, and other delicacies superior to those provided for him at Richmond. And we may add that he kept his word.

There was a floral fête that day at the Crystal Palace, and as the show of roses was expected to be magnificent, all the party—with one exception—went early to see it.

The exception was Lady Richborough. She did not care for roses, and preferred starting at a later hour. The colonel would fain have tarried for her, but she declined his attendance, and he went on with the others.

Ever since the explanation, though her ladyship continued ostensibly on the same terms with him as before, she contrived never to be alone with him.

As ill luck would have it, at the Victoria Station she encountered Sir Charles's two pests, Lord Robert Tadcaster and Captain de Vesci, and though their company was agreeable enough in the train, she contrived to get rid of them on her arrival at the Palace, and proceeded alone through the grounds towards the central entrance. She had not gone far when a young man who was passing raised his hat to her. It was Hilary St. Ives, and she stopped him.

"I had determined to speak to you, Mr. St. Ives

if I should ever meet you," she said. "Will you take the trouble to walk a few steps with me?"

Hilary was delighted to obey.

"Your ladyship does me great honour," he observed. "I thought you had forgotten all about me."

"No, I have really something important to say to you. But first let me tell you that you have very much offended Miss Radcliffe."

"Indeed! I am very sorry to hear it. In what way have I offended her?"

"By sending the gipsy to her at Ascot. The jest may have afforded you amusement, but you ought to have considered that Miss Radcliffe was likely to be annoyed by it."

"I am sorry your ladyship should think me capable of doing anything in such excessively bad taste," cried Hilary, reddening. "The gipsy was *not* sent by me, neither have I the slightest notion what she said. I certainly observed her leaning over the side of the carriage, and whispering something in Miss Radcliffe's ear, but that is all I know of the matter. I was a mere accidental spectator of the scene. Pray tell Miss Radcliffe so. I would not for worlds give her annoyance."

"I will tell her exactly what you say," replied Myrtille. "She will be glad to receive the assurance. Her marriage with my brother, Sir Charles Ilminster, is about to take place almost immediately."

"I wish them all happiness. Sir Charles will have

a lovely bride. He is singularly fortunate in his choice. Miss Radcliffe is one in a thousand."

"You speak enthusiastically," rejoined her ladyship, smiling.

"I utter my real sentiments. Your ladyship's condescension emboldens me to ask a favour of you. Mrs. Radcliffe has expressed some interest in me. Will you kindly inform her that I am about to proceed immediately to Paris? I think I shall do better there than in London."

"I will convey the message," she rejoined. "But I hope I am not to understand from it that you have been unsuccessful in your profession as an artist? Can I be of any service to you?" she continued, with an expression of real interest. "I do not make the offer lightly. Some circumstances connected with your history have recently come to my knowledge, and have shown me that you have been badly treated. I have it in my power to help you, and I will do so, if you choose to assert your rights."

"Alas! I have no *rights* to assert. Your ladyship does not understand my unfortunate position."

"I understand it better than you suppose. Your position is *not* unfortunate, and can be easily remedied."

"Alas! not so. There is no redress for me. I cannot move without injury to one who has the chief claim upon my affections."

"She deserves no consideration. She is the sole

obstacle to your recognition. Disregard her altogether."

"Not for worlds could I act thus. Reproach shall never touch her if I can prevent it. If your ladyship has obtained possession of the secret, I implore you to guard it strictly. Reflect, I beseech you, on the consequences of the slightest imprudence in a case involving the honour and happiness of so many persons. For the sake of those connected with her, I beseech your ladyship to spare her, and keep her secret."

"What mean you?" cried Myrtila, amazed. "Why should I spare her? What is she to me? Your observations seem to apply rather to Mrs. Radcliffe than to Mrs. Sutton."

Hilary saw the error into which he had been led, and endeavoured to rectify it.

"I am so troubled that I scarcely know what I say," he rejoined. "But Mrs. Radcliffe is the last person to whom my observations could apply."

"They could not possibly refer to Mrs. Sutton," remarked Myrtila.

"They were not intended to refer to her."

"To whom, then, did you allude?"

He tried to evade the question, and muttered something as her ladyship walked on slowly.

"You have perplexed me very much, Mr. St. Ives," she observed, after a short pause. "You have started a difficulty that I did not at all foresee. I think you are wrong, but be this as it may, you need fear no indiscretion on my part. I am, not a mischief-maker."

My sole desire is to see you righted, for I think you have been very badly used; but if this cannot be accomplished without detriment to others, I shall abandon the idea—at all events, for the present. I wish, however—if not inconvenient to yourself—that you would postpone your departure for Paris for a few days, and in the interim call upon me in Eaton-place. I should like to talk the matter over with you quietly.”

Hilary promised compliance, and professing himself deeply indebted to her ladyship for the kind interest she had manifested in him, bowed and took leave.

Had the interview been prolonged, even for a few minutes, it would have been disagreeably interrupted, for shortly afterwards Mrs. Radcliffe and the rest of the party appeared on the terrace, where Lady Richborough joined them.

Later on in the day—when an opportunity offered—she informed Mrs. Radcliffe of her meeting with Hilary, and delivered his message to her—carefully noting its effect.

Mrs. Radcliffe appeared much concerned. She had lost none of the interest with which the young man had originally inspired her.

“The news afflicts me greatly,” she said. “He has immense talent as an artist, but merit is not properly appreciated. He seems very soon discouraged. I dare not say more to Colonel Delacombe about him, but a word from your ladyship would do wonders.”

"I have offered my services to the young man, but he declines them."

"Poor fellow! he allows his pride to stand in his way. A thousand pities that he is so impracticable. Pray speak to the colonel. He will listen to you, though not to me. If the young man is going to Paris immediately, no time must be lost. I will acquaint Sutton with his intended departure. She feels for him like a mother, as I do myself."

"By-the-by, have you ever found out who is his mother?"

"No. I have no curiosity on the subject. There is no doubt she is dead."

"I am not so sure of that," rejoined Myrtille, looking at her.

"What reason has your ladyship for thinking otherwise?" cried Mrs. Radcliffe, surprised.

"I will tell you some other time. I cannot enter into particulars now."

"Can she be his mother?" she reflected.

This was May's first visit to the Crystal Palace, and everything conspired to render it agreeable. Sir Charles was with her, and his looks proclaimed his happiness. Others of the party were equally delighted with the scene, for it had the same charm of novelty to Mr. and Mrs. Radcliffe as to their daughter. The weather was superb—bright and breezy. The numerous assemblage attracted by the flower-show completely filled the interior of the building, which presented a magnificent coup d'œil.

Out of doors the scene was equally attractive—more so, perhaps. As the company began to stream forth and disperse among the grounds, which were then in their fullest beauty, the picture, as viewed from the terrace, was really enchanting, and May and Sir Charles gazed at it with delight.

As they were thus occupied in surveying the charming prospect, interchanging their sentiments, and almost betraying their innermost emotions by their looks, they were watched from a distance by Hilary.

After taking leave of Lady Richborough, as related, the young man did not quit the palace, but contrived, though unobserved, to keep her ladyship in sight. He beheld her meeting with the party. He saw Mrs. Radcliffe and Colonel Delacombe—with what feelings need not be described. Above all, he saw May.

Though his sentiments towards the latter were changed, he could not but regard her with the deepest interest, and he would have given worlds to exchange places with Sir Charles, and hold a brief converse with her.

He had much to say—much that never could be said—and it was not likely they should ever meet again. He might obtain a momentary glimpse of her—such as he now enjoyed—but that would be all.

How lovely she looked! How tender were the glances she bestowed on Sir Charles!—and how passionately devoted to her Sir Charles appeared. They were standing on the terrace, as we have described,

too much occupied by the scene before them—too much engrossed by each other to remark that they were watched.

Near to them stood Colonel Delacombe, laughing, and talking carelessly with Mrs. Radcliffe. Did either of them bestow a thought on *him*?

He turned from them to Lady Richborough, who was standing between Mr. Thornton and Mr. Radcliffe, and apparently delighting them both by her lively remarks. Her ladyship was evidently an object of general admiration, and Hilary could not help feeling flattered by the interest that had been taken in him by so charming a personage.

He still maintained his post of observation, when a ridiculous incident occurred that afforded a good deal of amusement to all who witnessed it.

The upper fountains had just begun to play, when two young men of very fashionable appearance, who had caught sight of Lady Richborough, and were hastening to join her, incautiously passed too near the jets, and were drenched from head to foot by the spray, which a sudden gust of wind carried over them.

Most pitiable objects they looked, with their dishevelled whiskers and dripping garments, and they hurried off as fast as they could to hide their discomfiture, but did not escape recognition as Lord Robert Tadcaster and Captain de Vesci. Mr. Radcliffe and Mr. Thornton laughed heartily, and Sir Charles was

not sorry that such an example had been made of them.

An excellent dinner concluded a very agreeable day, so far as the majority of the party was concerned. Lady Richborough, however, had still something to do. She went to two balls that night.

Next day our friends left town—the Radcliffes and old Mr. Thornton for Hazlemere, and Sir Charles Ilminster for Boxgrove.

While bidding adieu to Mrs. Radcliffe, the colonel strongly urged her to get rid of Mrs. Sutton.

"I do not see how that can be managed, just at present," said the lady.

"She must go—and speedily—or she will make more mischief," rejoined the colonel.

Mrs. Radcliffe smiled. She thought the housekeeper had done all the mischief she could.

She was very much mistaken.

XIX.

Lady Richborough receives a Proposal.

It will naturally be imagined that Hilary would present himself without delay in Eaton-place. Three days passed by, however, and he had neither called nor sent an excuse.

Lady Richborough, who had begun to take a strong interest in his fortunes, was very much surprised and annoyed by his unaccountable neglect.

On the morning of the fourth day after she had met him at the Crystal Palace she was alone in her elegantly-furnished drawing-room, wondering whether he would call, and prepared to take him to task if he did, when a valet entered, and announced—not the young gentleman who occupied her thoughts, but—Mr. Thornton.

Though secretly disappointed, she immediately rose from the fauteuil on which she was reclining, and welcomed her visitor with every demonstration of delight. Her ladyship, we may remark en passant, was attired in a robe of toile de l'Inde, with deep flounces, which suited her admirably.

“Good morning, dear Mr. Thornton,” she cried, in her blandest accents. “Enchanted to see you. Just come up from Hazlemere, I suppose? How did

you leave them all?—dear Miss Radcliffe—darling May—and dear excellent Mr. Radcliffe?”

“All much as usual,” replied the old gentleman. “The ladies desired their love to you, of course. Sir Charles dined with us yesterday, and we all dine with him to-day. Your ladyship will laugh when I tell you that May declares she will never come to town again, unless Sir Charles particularly desires it, and he invariably answers that she shall do just as she likes. Well, I hope it will last; they promise to be the happiest pair under the sun.”

“Yes, if happiness consists in a quiet, humdrum, country life, with no excitement beyond a stroll in the garden, a canter in the park, or a visit to the stables, they are likely to get on well enough. But that is not my notion of happiness, as you are aware, Mr. Thornton. I like town life—gaiety, and plenty of it.”

“I think your ladyship is quite right,” rejoined the old gentleman. “I begin to find the country rather dull myself. But of course I must remain at Hazlemere till the grand business is over. Apropos of the wedding, the bridesmaids are chosen, Jessie Brooke, the two Miss Milwards, Eva Dale, Gwendoline Clifford, Elfrida Butler, Lucy Fleming, and Selina Hardy, eight uncommonly pretty girls. Captain Huntley Blois is to be Sir Charles’s best man. The marriage, of course, will take place at Wootton, and our worthy vicar, the Rev. Nisbet Jones, will perform the ceremony.”

“In the day fixed, Mr. Thornton? It was not when they left town.”



"Yes, I believe it will be the 15th, but your ladyship will receive precise information from May. I understand they don't mean to go abroad, or make any lengthened tour, but return after a week's absence to Boxgrove, and spend the rest of the honeymoon at home."

"Just like Charlie! I wonder May will consent to such a stupid arrangement. They ought to go to Switzerland, or the Italian lakes. Bellagio, on the lake of Como, would be delightful, and take Paris on the way back."

"Delicious!" exclaimed the old gentleman, rapturously. "If I ever take another wedding trip, I'll follow your ladyship's advice and go to Como. By-the-by, I've something to say to you."

"Before you say it, let me ask you whether that young artist—you know whom I mean, Hilary St. Ives—has been lately at Hazlemere?"

"Odd, you should ask me the question. I believe he was there yesterday, but I didn't see him."

"I suppose Mrs. Radcliffe sent for him?"

"What for!" exclaimed the old gentleman, staring at her. "Why should she send for him?"

"It occurred to me that she might have done so—but never mind. What have you got to say to me?"

"Something that requires your best attention," he rejoined. "I must premise that I am tolerably well off. Prudence and economy in early life—together

with some fortunate speculations—have enabled me to realise a considerable property.”

Myrtila smiled. She suspected from his manner what was coming.

“I have always understood, Mr. Thornton, that you are rich—very rich,” she observed.

“Not *very* rich, but rich enough to make a good settlement, as I am prepared to do, if your ladyship——”

“Really, Mr. Thornton, you take me quite by surprise,” she cried, with difficulty repressing a laugh.

“I fear I have been too abrupt, but your ladyship will excuse me. Yesterday I learnt, for the first time, from my daughter, Mrs. Radcliffe, that all was at an end between your ladyship and Colonel Delacombe. I presume she was correctly informed?”

“No positive engagement ever subsisted between the colonel and myself, Mr. Thornton, and I may add none is likely to occur, but we are just as good friends as ever.”

“Exactly. I understand. Comes to the same thing. Engagement, or no engagement, it’s off.”

“If you like to have it so—yes. And certain not to be renewed.”

“Delighted to hear it—that is, sorry for my friend the colonel, for whom I have the greatest regard, but glad on my own account. Finding there was an opening for another suitor, I resolved to be first in the field, and here I am——”

"A word, Mr. Thornton. Pray did you acquaint Mrs. Radcliffe with your intention?"

"Most certainly, and Radcliffe too. I thought it only right and proper to consult them. They both highly approved of my design."

"Indeed! I should scarcely have expected it."

"They thought the match very desirable, as it would connect the families still more closely, and Sir Charles was of the same opinion. May was particularly well pleased. She thought it would be such a nice thing——"

"To have me for a grandmamma!" cried Myrtila, laughing. "Excessively obliged to her."

"To have you for a grandmamma!" exclaimed Mr. Thornton, aghast. "Who ever dreamed of such a thing? You must think me crazy."

"You told me, only this moment, that you were resolved to be first in the field—what does that mean?"

"It means that I have come to make you an offer of marriage—not from myself—I have not the presumption—but for my grandson, Oswald Woodcot. Having been partly refused on a former occasion, the poor fellow has not the courage to present himself again, so I have undertaken to plead his cause; and perhaps I may be able to use some arguments that may have weight, if you will deign to listen to them."

"I will listen to anything you may say to me, Mr. Thornton, but I cannot understand why Oswald should

require your intervention. I did not think bashfulness was his foible. Rather the reverse——”

“Well, if the truth must be told, he is without— anxiously, most anxiously, awaiting your decision. Shall I call him in?”

“By all means,” she replied. “I am concerned that he should have been kept there so long.”

Thereupon, the old gentleman opened the door, and his grandson immediately rushed in, and, flying towards her ladyship, threw himself in a theatrical manner at her feet. But she at once ordered him to rise.

“Such absurdity as this is out of date,” she cried. “Nobody kneels now-a-days—except upon the stage. Do you know what you have done, sir? By your ridiculous mode of proceeding you very nearly made me accept Mr. Thornton.”

“My stars! if I had known that, I would have gone in on my own account,” cried the old gentleman. “You see what powers of persuasion I possess, Oswald.”

“It appears to me that you have said one word for me and two for yourself, sir,” observed his grandson, reproachfully.

“Don’t be angry, my boy. All will be right in the end. The mistake will easily be rectified. Take him on my recommendation,” he said to Myrtilla. “I’ll answer for it, he’ll make an excellent husband.”

“Have you told her ladyship what you propose to do, sir?”

"No; but I'll tell her now in your presence. What I promise I'll perform. If your ladyship accepts the proposal which I have just had the honour to make on behalf of my grandson, I undertake that a jointure shall be settled on you corresponding in amount with that which you now enjoy, and which you will lose on your marriage."

"Upon my word, you do the thing very handsomely, I must say, Mr. Thornton," she observed, smiling.

"But that's not all," cried Oswald. "My dear old grand-dad is the most liberal fellow on earth."

"So he seems," she assented.

"I always intended to make Oswald my heir," pursued the old gentleman. "But if he marries to please me—as he will, if he marries your ladyship—he shall have a handsome allowance during my lifetime."

"Didn't I say he was a capital fellow?" cried Oswald.

"My desire is to make all pleasant," added the old gentleman; "and I hope I shall be able to go back to Hazlemere and tell them that the affair is satisfactorily settled."

"Now for the decision," said Oswald. "My happiness and my fortune rest with your ladyship."

"I must have time for consideration," she rejoined. "I should like to please Mr. Thornton, who has behaved so remarkably well, and to whom I feel personally indebted, and I have no particular objection

to you, Oswald, but I can't make up my mind at a moment's notice."

"Then I am neither accepted nor rejected?" said the young man, looking very blank.

"Can't I prevail on your ladyship to say 'Yes'?" insinuated the old gentleman.

She shook her head, and rejoined, "Neither you nor Oswald understand me in the least. You have to do with the most fickle creature on earth. Were I to give you a promise now, ten to one I should break it, and then you would upbraid me with falsehood, inconstancy, and all that sort of thing. Don't press me further. I repeat, I can't make up my mind."

"Well, I still hope your ladyship may spend a month at the lovely lake of Como, and that I may have the pleasure of meeting you at Paris when you return."

"Not this autumn, I think, Mr. Thornton," she rejoined.

"We shall see—we shall see."

Just then, the valet entered, and approaching Myrtilla, said:

"Mr. Hilary St. Ives is here. Will your ladyship see him?"

She coloured slightly, as she answered in the affirmative.

"What the deuce is he doing here?" cried Mr. Thornton.

"Come to take her ladyship's portrait, of course," remarked Oswald.

"He has called by my express invitation," observed Lady Richborough. "Pray don't run away on his account. Luncheon will be ready directly. Do me the favour to step down to the dining-room; I'll join you as soon as my conference with Mr. St. Ives is ended."

The proposition was too agreeable to be declined. As the two gentlemen were quitting the room, Hilary was ushered in, and they met near the door. Mr. Thornton bowed very stiffly, but Oswald gave the young artist a good-natured nod of recognition.

"I don't know how it is," remarked Oswald to his grandsire, as they went down-stairs; "but that confounded fellow seems always to cross my path."

XX.

In which Hilary finds a Father.

"You have made very little haste to call upon me, Mr. St. Ives," observed Lady Richborough, motioning him to take a seat. "However, I do not require any apologies. I have just learnt from Mr. Thornton that you have been at Hazlemere."

"I was summoned there," he replied. "On the morning after I was fortunate enough to meet your ladyship at the Crystal Palace, I received a letter from Mrs. Radcliffe enjoining me to come down to her without delay, and could not refuse compliance, though I had resolved never to go to Hazlemere again. In obedience to the instructions given me, I went down by a particular train. Mrs. Sutton met me at the station and conducted me to the house. I had an interview with Mrs. Radcliffe, which I need not detail, except to say that I consented to act according to her directions."

"You did well," observed Myrtila. "I am certain she would advise you for the best."

"I felt so," he replied; "and though stung by a sense of injustice which prompted a very different course, I yielded to her entreaties, and agreed not to depart for Paris without seeing Colonel Delacombe. Mrs. Radcliffe assured me—as I cannot doubt—that

no one has so much influence with the colonel as your ladyship—and she assured me also that you are willing to exert it in my behalf.”

“My influence with Colonel Delacombe is not so great as Mrs. Radcliffe imagines,” replied Myrtila; “but I should like to hear something more about Mrs. Sutton. Had you no conversation with her? Had she no suggestions to offer?”

“Mrs. Sutton’s manner towards me is incomprehensible,” he rejoined. “Nothing could exceed the delight that she exhibited when she met me at the station. If I had been really her son, she could not have greeted me with more affection. But before we reached the house her manner had totally changed. Perhaps I did not please her by my observations, for she seemed to resent them. I am certain that she dislikes—I might almost say hates—Mrs. Radcliffe; and she entertains no more kindly feeling towards Colonel Delacombe. She gives me the idea of a person in possession of an important secret which she uses for her own purposes.”

“It is a great misfortune that she is installed at Hazlemere, and I fear Mrs. Radcliffe will have reason to regret the trust she places in her. If Mrs. Sutton were not in the way, I should have no difficulty with Colonel Delacombe. Do not ask me for any explanation. I cannot give it. Was she present during your interview with Mrs. Radcliffe?”

“No; and I was very cautious in what I said to her, for, in spite of her professions of regard, her

manner inspired me with distrust. I ought to mention that Mrs. Radcliffe told me she would write to the colonel, and beg him to confer with your ladyship. A few days ago I should not have cared to succeed, but now I ardently desire to do so."

"What has produced this sudden change in your sentiments?" she inquired.

"I am ambitious," he cried. "I have aspirations which I ought not to indulge, but which I cannot help indulging. At all hazards I must speak the truth. Ever since our meeting, your image has haunted me, and will not be dismissed. I am an artist, and you will not wonder that beauty, such as yours, should produce an extraordinary effect upon me. I tried to control the passion inspired by your charms, but it has mastered me. Never has my position appeared so intolerable as now. I would be something better—something on which you would not disdain to cast your regards. I know you will laugh at my folly and extravagance, but at least you will understand why I desire to attain a higher position."

Lady Richborough did not appear offended.

"If I have any rights, as you intimated when we last met, I am resolved to assert them," he pursued.

"The best thing to cure you of your romantic folly would be to allow you to remain as you are," she observed. "But I have promised to aid you, and I will be as good as my word. Pray did you make Mrs. Radcliffe a confidante of your passion?"

The young man looked abashed.

"She may have drawn her own conclusions from the raptures in which I spoke of your ladyship's charms," he said.

"I thought as much," she rejoined. "That accounts for a visit I have just received."

An interruption here occurred. Colonel Delacombe was ushered in by the valet, who immediately retired.

Hilary at once arose and prepared to depart, but Lady Richborough detained him.

Then turning to the colonel, who did not manifest either surprise or displeasure on seeing the young man, she said,

"I am very glad you have come, colonel. Mr. St. Ives has just laid his case before me, and I have undertaken to become his advocate."

"He could not have a better," rejoined the other. "It may save time, however, if I state at once that my mind is made up. This morning I have received a long letter from Mrs. Radcliffe. She, too, is a zealous advocate in the young man's cause, and pleads it warmly and strongly. But her pleading, I confess, would have been of no avail but for a wholly unforeseen circumstance. Doubts have rested on my mind that have warped my judgment and feelings, and converted what should have been affection into hate. These doubts have just been removed. How, or by whom, I need not now explain, but proofs have been afforded me that I was utterly wrong in my suspicions. Satisfied of this, I could not for a moment hesitate to

repair the injustice I have done. Learning that the man was here, I came on instantly. In your ladyship's presence, I acknowledge him as my son."

Hilary uttered an exclamation of joy, and threw himself into his father's outstretched arms.

"Nobly done, Seymour," cried Myrtila. "You have not belied my expectations."

"I cannot suitably express my feelings of gratitude," said Hilary, in accents broken by emotion. "But this moment makes amends for all the past."

"Let the past be forgotten," said the colonel. "You will not blame me too severely when you know all. I will endeavour to atone for the error I have committed."

"Enough, sir—more than enough," cried his son.

"I cannot obey the dictates of my heart, which prompt me at once to acknowledge you publicly," said the colonel. "For some little time longer you must be content to remain Hilary St. Ives. But you need give yourself no concern in regard to the future. Henceforward, your position is completely assured."

"I beg to offer you my sincere congratulations, Mr. St. Ives, for I suppose I must still call you so," said Lady Richborough, archly. "You have now obtained the position you so much desired."

The colonel detected the glance that passed between her ladyship and the young man.

"His position and his fortune—for he will have both," he observed, in a significant tone—"will enable him to marry well."

"You mean to leave him behind, when you return to India, colonel?" she inquired.

"That depends," he replied. "If he should be fortunate enough to marry, his wife may not object to go out with us. I think I have heard your ladyship say that you would like to visit the country."

"Yes, I have said so, but I never meant it seriously."

"For my own part I have the greatest desire to visit India," cried Hilary. "It has every sort of attraction for me."

"You expect great things, I perceive, but I don't think you will be disappointed," said the colonel. "You will find plenty of employment there for your pencil, if you choose to exercise it."

"And plenty of charming society, I suppose?" observed Hilary.

"The pleasantest society on earth—especially to ladies," rejoined the colonel. "Nowhere, as I have often remarked to Lady Richborough, are ladies made so much of as in India. A beautiful woman is positively adored there, and exercises a sway quite unattainable in England."

"A tempting description," observed Hilary, glancing at her ladyship.

"Perhaps I may go to India, when I have nothing better to do," she remarked, with a smile. "But come down to luncheon. It must be ready. Some of our friends from Hazlemere are here," she added to the colonel.

Upon this they descended to the dining-room, where they found Mr. Thornton and Oswald, both of whom were very glad to see the colonel, but amazed that Hilary had not departed. An elegant collation was speedily served, and a glass of champagne raised Oswald's spirits. He would have felt far happier, however, if her ladyship had not paid so much attention to Hilary. Neither he nor his grandsire could understand the remarkable change in Colonel Delacombe's deportment towards the young artist. He now treated him with so much friendliness that the old gentleman whispered to Oswald:

"Begad! it wouldn't surprise me if he were to acknowledge him, after all.

This impression was confirmed by a remark made by the colonel to Lady Richborough, seeming to imply that Hilary was going with him to his hotel.

Indeed, there could be no doubt on the point, since Mr. Thornton, being curious enough to look out of the dining-room window, beheld Hilary jump into the brougham, which was drawn up at the door, and heard the order given by the colonel to drive to the Langham.

Prior to his departure, the colonel had charged the old gentleman with a message to Mrs. Radcliffe to the effect that he meant to run down to Hazlemere on the following day. But he didn't add—as Mr. Thornton half expected—that he meant to bring Hilary with him.

Grandsire and grandson lingered for a few min in the vain hope of obtaining some encourager from Lady Richborough. Her ladyship, however, not relent.

XXI.

Explains the Colonel's Errand.

NEXT day, Colonel Delacombe went down to Hazlemere, as appointed.

"He did not arrive till the afternoon, and all the party, except the lady of the house, had gone over to Boxgrove. Immediately on his arrival, he inquired for the housekeeper, stating that he had something to say to her, and Mr. Luff conducted him to her room.

Mrs. Sutton, who was engaged at the time on some household matters, received him with all the deference consistent with her station, so long as the butler was present, but as soon as they were alone, her manner changed, and with a menacing look she demanded what brought him again to Hazlemere.

"My errand, as I think you might guess, is to see you," he replied, seating himself. "A good deal has happened lately."

"Yes, your designs upon Lady Richborough have been frustrated," she rejoined, with a bitter smile; "and if you have any designs here they will likewise be frustrated."

"Before you make any further observations, which only serve to display your malignity, it may be as well to inform you that I saw Mr. Courtenay yesterday."

The housekeeper turned very pale. He remarked the effect produced upon her.

"Perhaps you will talk a little more rationally now," he said.

"I care nothing for Mr. Courtenay," she cried, recovering herself. "He can tell you nothing that you did not know before."

"Pardon me. He gave me some particulars of your history with which I was wholly unacquainted. Hitherto," he continued, in a stern tone, "I believed that your unhappy mother died of a broken heart. I now know——"

"It is false," she interrupted, fiercely. "Mr. Courtenay is my deadly enemy, and would destroy me if he could. You do not believe me capable of such a deed as that with which he charges me?"

"I will not pronounce an opinion," said the colonel, still more sternly. "I would fain hope you are innocent of this foul and unnatural crime; but after what I have heard, I can scarcely acquit you."

"I am innocent," cried the wretched woman. "As I hope for mercy hereafter, I am innocent of this dreadful offence! Say you believe me, Seymour!—say you believe me!"

"Do not touch me, woman!" he cried, pushing her from him, with an expression of loathing.

"Oh! Heaven support me!" she cried, sinking into a chair with a look of agony.

"If I did my duty," he said, after a pause, "I

could bring you to justice; but I am restrained by considerations which you will understand."

"Considerations for yourself," she cried, with a vindictive look. "You would not spare me, if your own reputation were not at stake."

"I spare you for your son's sake as well as my own," he rejoined. "The stings of an accusing conscience, which you cannot stifle, will be punishment enough for you."

"Do not condemn me unheard," she cried, rousing herself, and speaking with impassioned earnestness. "You have lent a too ready ear to this charge. It cannot be substantiated. I can show you Mr. Courtnay's motives for making it."

"I do not desire to hear them," he said. "Your own conduct condemns you; your quarrels with your unhappy mother, and her death, under suspicious circumstances, seem to fix the crime on you. But evidences of guilt are afforded by your flight with your ramour—by your desertion of your child—by the device adopted to screen yourself from the consequences of your evil deeds. If innocent, why allow it to be supposed that you had perished in the Severn? Why conceal your existence? Why hide yourself under a feigned name? If innocent, why are you here—as Mrs. Sutton? Your conduct proclaims your guilt."

"It may seem to do so—but I was driven to act as I did by remorse—not for the crime which you believe me to have committed, and of which, as Heaven knows! I am innocent—but for other offences. I

knew I should be shunned and despised, and wished to be forgotten. I found, as I deemed, a secure retreat, and remained in it unmolested for years—and might have remained in it to the end, if you—to whom I owe all my affliction—had not appeared to trouble me. I am not so bad as you suppose. I have sinned deeply, but have repented. I would willingly—if I could—have made some atonement for my errors. I might have died in peace—unknown and respected. Of all men, I would most have avoided you, Seymour Delacombe. But fate has brought you hither to perplex me—to rouse evil passions in my breast, and prompt evil actions. I warned you not to come. I besought you not to meddle with me. You would not heed; and if ill ensues, you will be responsible for it.”

“It is useless to continue this discussion,” observed the colonel, entirely unmoved by her defence. “I have simply to tell you that you cannot remain longer here.”

“You tell me so?” she said, in a singular tone, in which a latent menace could be detected. “What if I refuse to go on your bidding?”

“You will not refuse, when I tell you that by remaining here you will mar your son’s prospects.”

“Do you mean to acknowledge him?”

“Not till you are gone.”

A fierce conflict took place in the unhappy woman’s bosom. Vindictive feelings obtained the mastery. Infernal malice blazed in her eyes as she spoke.

"My son is nothing to me," she cried. "He is devoid of natural feeling. When he was here the other day, he drove me mad by his utter insensibility. If he loved me, I would make any sacrifice for him. I would lay down my life to serve him. But he hates me, and thinks only of the detestable woman who has robbed me of his affections. I will stay to plague *her*."

"Have you no good feeling left?"

"When my lacerated heart is healed, it will be time to talk to me of good feelings," she rejoined. "Meanwhile, I stay here. Try to remove me at your peril."

"You shall go, be the consequences what they may," cried the colonel.

And he arose and left the room.

Ascertaining from Boston that Mrs. Radcliffe was in her boudoir, he proceeded thither at once.

"That infernal woman is capable of anything," he thought, as he went up-stairs.

He was right, and he would have comprehended her vindictive purpose, if he had seen her take a letter from a private drawer, and heard her mutter,

"It is well I secured this letter. The time is come to use it."

XXII.

The Use made of the Letter.

ARMED with this letter, Mrs. Sutton left her room. She knew where the colonel was gone, and was about to follow him, when she encountered Mr. Radcliffe in the hall. He had just returned from Boxgrove, having ridden on by himself. Struck by the housekeeper's haggard looks, he inquired what was the matter.

"I have something to say to you, sir—something important—in private," she rejoined.

"Well, come with me to my study. We shan't be disturbed there. Colonel Delacombe, I hear, has arrived."

"Yes; he is with Mrs. Radcliffe—in her boudoir," she replied, significantly.

"Nothing strange in that," observed the worthy gentleman.

The housekeeper accompanied him to his study—a comfortable little room adjoining the library, in which he transacted his magisterial business. It was furnished with a large writing-table, on which sundry law-books were laid, together with files of papers. Seating himself near this table, he requested the housekeeper to take a chair beside him.

"By-the-by, Sutton, have you heard the news?" he

remarked. "Colonel Delacombe, I'm told, is about to adopt that young artist, who came here—Hilary St. Ives. Odd! ain't it?"

"It may appear odd to you, sir, but it doesn't surprise me. Ah! sir, you little know——"

"Little know what?" he cried. "Speak plainly. Why do you look at me in that manner?"

"Because I'm so sorry for you, sir. My heart bleeds for you. But it must out—it must out."

"What must out?" he demanded.

"The dreadful secret," she rejoined. "I can keep it no longer. Prepare yourself for a great shock, sir. You will need all your firmness."

Mr. Radcliffe's looks betokened great trouble, but the relentless woman went on.

"Read that," she said, placing the letter before him. "That will tell you all. That will show you how you have been deceived."

Damps gathered upon the poor gentleman's brow, and his vision grew dim.

"I would rather not read it, Sutton," he said, in a husky, unnatural voice, pushing the letter from him as he spoke. "I don't want to learn anything that will give me pain. I would rather rest in ignorance."

This did not suit her.

"You *will* read the letter, sir," she said, "when I tell you that it is from the young man you have just mentioned—Hilary St. Ives—to *his mother*."

"To his mother, did you say? Why, it is addressed to my wife," he cried, snatching up the letter to examine it.

"Your wife is his mother," said Mrs. Sutton, in a hollow voice.

"You lie, woman!" cried Mr. Radcliffe, springing up, and striking the table with his clenched hand. "You lie! How dare you make such an abominable insinuation? Quit my presence instantly! Quit the house! Begone!"

"I am ready to go at once," she rejoined, rising. "But you will repent the language you have used towards me. My feelings would not allow me to conceal the truth."

"Stay!" he cried. "I am half distracted. You must make allowances for me, Sutton."

"I make every allowance for you, sir. I pity you from the bottom of my heart."

He sat down. His hand shook so much that he could scarcely hold the letter, but he went on, pausing every now and then to wipe the damps from his brow.

At last the letter dropped upon the table.

The mischief was done.

"You have destroyed my peace for ever, Sutton," groaned the miserable man, after a pause; "but I forgive you. What a cruel deception has been practised upon me! How I doted upon her!"

"Had you no previous suspicions, sir?"

"Suspensions?—no! I had the most perfect faith in her. I believed every word she told me—every word. I knew that an engagement had subsisted between her and Seymour Delacombe—I knew that she nourished a silly, sentimental regard for him—but the idea of anything wrong never entered my head. Even now—with this frightful evidence before me—I can scarcely believe it."

"I thought her conduct towards the young man might have surprised you, sir."

"It did surprise me. I disapproved of her absurd demonstrations of regard for him, though I took no notice of them. But they bear a different construction now. What am I to do, Sutton? What am I to do?"

"Act like a man, sir. Under such circumstances, there is but one course to pursue."

"But I have not the heart to cast her from me, as you would seem to suggest. Besides," he cried, with a sudden access of tenderness, "she is the mother of my child. For May's sake I must endure the wrong patiently and in silence."

"For your own sake you cannot allow things to continue as they are. The colonel must not remain here."

"He shall not," cried the deluded man, transported with fury. "He is in the boudoir, you say, with my wife. I am half inclined to blow out his brains."

"He richly deserves it, but it will be enough if you order him out of the house."

"I'll go to them at once. I will not allow my just indignation to cool," he cried, rushing out of his study, and hurrying up-stairs to the boudoir.

"They will now feel my power," cried Mrs. Sutton, with an exulting smile.

XXIII.

An ill Quarter of an Hour.

MR. RADCLIFFE'S wild looks and abrupt entrance were well calculated to alarm his wife and the colonel, who were engaged at the moment in an anxious discussion relative to Mrs. Sutton—the colonel urging her immediate dismissal, and the lady reluctant to yield assent. They guessed what had happened, and prepared for a storm.

Without vouchsafing a word, and scarcely appearing to notice them, the incensed gentleman marched straight to the fireplace, and taking down the two miniatures, which had been restored to their places, smashed them with the poker, and flung the fragments into the grate.

"There!" he roared. "Those accursed objects will never more offend my sight."

He then turned round, and glared at the astonished witnesses of his proceeding, who, while his back was towards them, had exchanged very expressive glances and gestures.

"Have you taken leave of your senses, Mr. Radcliffe?" inquired his wife, eyeing him through her glass, and speaking with a calmness that aggravated his fury.

"Perhaps I have," he vociferated, almost foaming at the mouth with rage. "I have enough to make me mad. I have long been your dupe, madam, but at last my eyes are opened, and I clearly discern the position in which you have placed me by your perfidious conduct. I have read the letter of—of"—the words well-nigh suffocated him, but at last he got them out "of your son! Here it is, madam. Look at it! Can you deny that this letter is addressed to you?"

"No, I do not attempt to deny it," she replied, calmly.

"Then you glory in your shame! You unblushingly avow that you have deceived me—ha!"

"When you speak more temperately, Mr. Radcliffe—in a manner more befitting our relations towards each other—I will answer you; but thus addressed, I shall not condescend to do so."

"You take it with a very high hand, madam," he sneered; "but it won't answer your purpose. I am not to be imposed upon."

"My good Mr. Radcliffe," said the colonel, "you are entirely under a delusion."

"A delusion!" exclaimed the other, exasperated beyond all bounds by the remark. "Do you mean to tell me that I am to doubt the evidence of my own senses? I have here in this damnatory letter proof positive of my unhappy wife's criminality."

"My criminality, Mr. Radcliffe! I will not allow such language to be used to me."

"You will regret your violence, sir, when you are

able to view the matter in its proper light," observed the colonel. "If you will only hear me——"

"Explanations will not avail with me, sir. It will be idle, therefore, to attempt them."

Then with a withering look at his wife, he cried, "You forget, madam, that in this very room, where you are now sitting, I beheld your son at your feet. I heard you address him with all a mother's tenderness."

"I believed him to be the colonel's son," she rejoined.

"I don't doubt it," cried her husband, bitterly. "You had good reasons for the belief."

"Mr. Radcliffe," said Colonel Delacombe, sternly, "this must proceed no further. You are merely an instrument in the hands of a malignant and vindictive woman, who, for purposes of her own—which, if I deemed proper, I could easily explain—seeks to injure me and destroy your wife's reputation. How came that letter, from which you have drawn these erroneous conclusions, in Mrs. Sutton's possession?"

"I never gave it her," said Mrs. Radcliffe.

"It must have been stolen to serve the infamous purpose for which it has been used," said the colonel. "Call Mrs. Sutton. I engage to unmask her villany."

Mrs. Radcliffe was about to ring the bell, but her husband authoritatively forbade her.

"I won't have her called," he said. "I won't have a scene made. I am quite satisfied with her conduct. She has done her duty to me."

"She is a perfidious wretch," cried Mrs. Radcliffe.

"Is this her return for all the kindness I have shown her!"

"A more atrocious scheme was never planned," said the colonel. "I will show you the motives of her conduct——"

"I am perfectly satisfied with her motives," rejoined Mr. Radcliffe, coldly.

"But you are labouring under an entire misapprehension, sir. Again, I request that the woman may be summoned."

"It will answer no purpose," rejoined Mr. Radcliffe, shaking his head. "Recriminations won't convince me."

"You are a barbarian," cried his wife—"a perfect barbarian!"

"You have made me what I am, madam," he rejoined.

"I protest my innocence, sir!—protest it in the strongest terms. Will you believe me now?"

"Proofs are against you, madam—incontestable proofs."

"Oh! this is too much," she cried, sinking back. "I shall never survive it."

"I must ring for assistance, sir," said the colonel.

"Leave her alone," interposed Mr. Radcliffe. "She has a smelling-bottle near her, if she wants it."

Hearing this, his wife sprang up in the greatest indignation.

"I have just said you are a barbarian, Mr. Rad-

cliffe," she cried; "and I now say you are a brute. Would you allow me to expire before your eyes?"

"I am not afraid of your dying. Keep quiet and listen to me. This frightful secret has only just been revealed to me, and the agitation it has caused has not allowed me to consider how I shall act. But I shall do nothing harshly. Though you have deeply wronged me I will not expose you to the contumely of the world. Your worthy father's later years shall not be embittered by the knowledge of your guilt. Your daughter"—and his voice faltered—"your daughter shall never learn it. Not for worlds would I have her know it."

"For mercy's sake, Mr. Radcliffe, do not go on thus. I am your faithful, loving wife."

And she tried to approach him, but he gently repulsed her.

"Had I known your true character, Esther, you would never have been my wife. For our child's sake I will bear with you. But never again will you be to me what you have been."

She gazed at him as if doubting what he said, but reading inflexibility in his looks, she uttered an hysterical cry, and would have fallen if he had not caught her.

This was no pretended faintness, and scarcely knowing what he was about, Mr. Radcliffe rang the bell violently, while the colonel bathed the poor lady's temples with eau-de-Cologne, and gave her the flacon of salts to smell at.

"Sad work!" he observed to Mr. Radcliffe; "and to think that all this needless misery has been caused by that accursed woman. Ah! here she is," he exclaimed, as the door was opened. "Now for it!"

But she did not come alone. May was with her, and on seeing his daughter, Mr. Radcliffe whispered to the colonel:

"Not a word before her, sir, I insist."

The hypocritical housekeeper flew to her mistress, and, feigning the greatest concern at her condition, quickly relieved Mr. Radcliffe of his burden, and placing the lady in her easy-chair, proceeded to apply fresh restoratives.

May was not so much alarmed as she would have been, had these fainting-fits been of less frequent occurrence. Nevertheless, she held one of her mother's hands in her own, and looked on anxiously.

"What has caused this, papa?" she asked.

"I can scarcely tell," he replied. "Your mamma is subject to these attacks, you know."

Mrs. Radcliffe at this moment began to recover her consciousness. On opening her eyes, and perceiving Mrs. Sutton near her, she pushed her off with signs of the greatest aversion.

But a gesture from Mr. Radcliffe prevented her from giving utterance to her anger.

"I have only waited for Mrs. Radcliffe's recovery to take my leave," said the colonel. "Pray make my adieux."

"You are not going," said the lady, slightly

raising herself. "You are not obliged to return to town at once."

"Not exactly obliged, but——"

"Then, pray, stay."

"Yes, pray do, colonel," urged May. "Sir Charles quite calculates on meeting you at dinner."

"Well, I won't disappoint him. I will stay with the greatest pleasure."

"Very glad to hear it," cried Mr. Radcliffe, with affected heartiness.

Mrs. Sutton could scarcely conceal her mortification at this unexpected turn of affairs.

XXIV.

The Warning.

THINGS were now in a most unfortunate position. Without explaining his connection with Mrs. Sutton—without detailing his early history, which he could not persuade himself to do—Colonel Delacombe was unable to remove the baneful impression produced upon Mr. Radcliffe by Hilary's letter. Indeed the poor gentleman absolutely refused to listen to any further explanation. The colonel therefore was compelled to desist, and allow things to remain as they were for the present.

Luckily there was a numerous dinner-party that day, and this offered some distraction. Mr. Radcliffe had to attend to his guests, and his thoughts were forcibly turned into other channels. As he gazed on his beloved child, who was seated next Sir Charles, and saw how bright and happy she looked, could he bring a shade upon that lovely brow? No, she must never learn his griefs. Mrs. Radcliffe put on a gay mask. Angry with her husband—angry with the colonel—excessively angry with Mrs. Sutton—she felt the necessity of keeping up appearances, and tried to look lively and unconcerned.

The dinner-party was exceedingly pleasant, and

numbered half a dozen out of the eight charming girls chosen to act as bridesmaids at the approaching ceremonial. An equal number of young men had been invited, so there was plenty of animated conversation, and possibly some little flirting. Bridesmaids expect to become brides in their turn, and all these were so pretty, that it seemed likely their expectations would be realised. Our inflammable friend Oswald was struck with a sudden admiration of the golden tresses and delicately fair complexion of Jessie Brooke, and paid her great attention. He was a sad fellow, that Oswald, and his grandsire did not know what to make of him. If the colonel was ill at ease as well as his host, no one found it out. He chanced to sit next to the vicar of Wootton, who had a very important part to play at the ceremony, and delighted the reverend gentleman with his conversation.

After dinner, there was music and a little carpet-dance for the young folks, in which both May and her lover took part, for though Sir Charles, as we know, disliked balls, he did not object to a quiet quadrille. Never had he passed a happier evening, and he told May, as he bade her adieu for the night, that he hoped they should pass many—many such. Two days only intervened between them and the consummation of their happiness. On the third day May would become Lady Ilminster, and Sir Charles would be blessed—so he thought—with the fairest bride in England. All looked bright—too bright, perhaps, to last. But they had no misgivings. Possessing everything that can

contribute to human felicity, they had every reasonable expectation of a long term of uninterrupted bliss.

They parted overnight, as we have described, Sir Charles assuring his intended bride, as he pressed her hand, that he had never been so happy as on that night, and she echoing the sentiment.

They met next morning, as arranged. The whole party had driven over to Boxgrove. Though Sir Charles did his best to conceal it, it was evident that he had something on his mind, but May forbore to question him till they were alone. She lured him out into the park, and as they shaped their course towards a grove his gloom increased—so much so that she began to feel quite uncomfortable. At last they sat down beneath a large oak, whose broad arms completely sheltered them from the sun. Then looking earnestly and entreatingly into his face, she besought him to tell her what was the matter.

"I have a presentiment of misfortune which I cannot shake off," he replied, with a sad smile. "I have had a warning."

The tone in which he pronounced the words made her blood run cold.

"A warning!" she echoed.

"Were you never told that we have a singular superstition?" he rejoined. "It is believed that each member of our family is warned of approaching death."

"You are saying this to frighten me, Charlie," said May, trying to force a smile, but unable to repress a shudder.

"Indeed I am not," he rejoined. "The warning is a matter of faith with all of us. There are too many instances on record to allow of any doubt."

"You never mentioned this to me before, Charlie."

"I wish I had not mentioned it now, for I have banished the roses from your cheeks. However, I must tell you all, since I have begun. My ancestor Sir Alberic was accidentally poisoned by his physician, and it is supposed that the warning is given by the troubled spirit of this man. Be this as it may, it is certain that a dark shadowy figure is seen before any of our family dies at Boxgrove. This I myself can attest. On the night before the death of my father, Sir Umfraville, I beheld the shadow."

May uttered an exclamation of mingled astonishment and horror.

"He was ill at the time, but not thought to be in danger," he continued. "I was proceeding along the corridor towards his room, when I saw a dark figure pass through the door. But I had no uneasiness, for I thought it was one of the servants. When I entered, my father was alone, sleeping in his easy-chair, and breathing heavily. I aroused him from his troubled slumber, and he complained that he had just felt a deadly chill strike to his heart, but I did not tell him what had caused it. Next night he died."

May did not dare to ask any further question, but after a brief pause he went on:

"You know how happy I was last night. When I sought my couch I was still dwelling upon the events

of the day, and soon sank into a peaceful slumber. But my repose was disturbed by a sense of deadly oppression such as I never before experienced. I felt chilled to the marrow, and could scarcely breathe. Making a convulsive effort to shake off the horrible nightmare, I sprang bolt upright in bed, and then by the dim moonlight that struggled through the window-curtains I distinctly beheld a dark shadow glide through the door. The deadly chill was then accounted for. I instantly sprang from my couch, but the door was shut before I reached it. The next moment, however, I was in the corridor. No one was there. All was hushed and still as the grave. The moonbeams fell upon the portrait of Sir Alberic, which hangs there, as you may remember. The old warrior seemed to gaze compassionately upon the last of his long line. I have had my warning, May."

"Heaven forbid!" she ejaculated, fervently.

"Ah! it would be hard indeed to leave you for ever, May!" he exclaimed, gazing at her with unutterable tenderness. "Years hence, I hope we shall be seated together beneath this tree, and laugh as we recal the warning. But if it should be otherwise—if I should be suddenly snatched from you by fate—think of what I now say. My last thought will be of you—my last sigh will breathe your name."

"You will make me perfectly wretched if you talk thus," she cried. "Ah! if I were to lose you, I should never be happy again."

"Let us talk of something else. See! there are

visitors," he added, pointing out an open carriage, filled with ladies, which was approaching the mansion. "Let us go meet them."

She took his arm, and they proceeded slowly towards the house. A number of persons were assembled in the garden. The carriage they had seen brought the two Miss Milwards and Jessie Brooke, and after a little lively conversation, a game at croquet was arranged, in which Oswald and two other young men took part.

Leaving May with Colonel Delacombe to watch the game, Sir Charles joined Mr. Radcliffe and Mr. Thornton, who were sauntering along the lawn, and begged them to step into the house with him for a few minutes, and they all three passed through an open French window into the library.

"I require your professional assistance, Mr. Thornton," observed Sir Charles, as they entered the room.

"Most happy to afford it you," replied the old gentleman. "What do you want me to do?"

"To make my will," replied the other.

Both his hearers expressed surprise, and Mr. Thornton thought the baronet must be joking.

"I am perfectly serious," remarked Sir Charles. "I want the thing done without delay."

"I should be the last person to oppose your determination," said Mr. Thornton; "and I will carry your intentions into effect, if you desire it, but the disposition of a large property like yours ought to be carefully considered. I will take down any instructions

you may give me, Sir Charles," he added, seating himself at a table on which writing materials were placed.

"Perhaps I had better retire," remarked Mr. Radcliffe.

"On no account," said the baronet. "I desire your presence, but beg you not to comment upon my instructions. Let the instrument be as brief as possible," he added to Mr. Thornton. "With the exception of a legacy of thirty thousand pounds to my sister, Lady Richborough, I mean to leave the whole of my property, real and personal—Boxgrove, and all my other estates, to May."

"You have requested me not to make a comment, Sir Charles," observed Mr. Radcliffe; "but I cannot help saying that you are acting far too generously towards my daughter."

"Mr. Radcliffe," said Sir Charles, with profound emotion, "your daughter is dearer to me than any one on earth. Except the sum devoted to my sister, all I have shall be hers."

The tone in which he spoke left no doubt that his resolution was taken, and Mr. Thornton forbore to make a remark.

"I am ready to begin, Sir Charles," he said, taking up a pen; "but I think you had better delay the matter until after your marriage."

"Not for a single day—not for an hour," he rejoined. "No telling what may happen."

"Very true," observed the old gentleman. "Well,

I'll make it as short as I can. Who are to be the executors?"

"Yourself and Mr. Radcliffe, if you will undertake the office."

No objections made. The old gentleman set to work, and in a very few minutes drew up the document, which, important as it was, did not occupy more than half a side of paper.

"This is sufficiently concise, I think," he remarked.

And he read what he had written to Sir Charles, who signified his perfect approval, adding that he wished to execute the instrument forthwith.

"In that case we must have witnesses," said Mr. Thornton. "Lend me your signet-ring, Sir Charles."

While the old gentleman was placing a seal in black wax on the document, Mr. Dancer and two other men-servants were summoned, and in their presence the will was duly executed by Sir Charles, who requested Mr. Thornton to take charge of the document.

"Now that the thing is done, Sir Charles," said the old gentleman, "I must remark that you have hurried yourself very unnecessarily."

"I wished to get the business off my mind," replied the other.

Just then May and Colonel Delacombe appeared at the open window.

"Not a word to her," said the baronet, with a gesture of silence.

She had come to ask him to join the croquet party,

and he willingly complied. He had now quite recovered his cheerfulness, and seemed to have forgotten the nocturnal incident that had caused him so much disquietude.

By this time several more visitors had arrived, and a large and gaily dressed assemblage, in which the gentler sex predominated, was collected on the lawn, where croquet was being played. After an hour spent very agreeably, the gong summoned the company to luncheon, and both Mr. Radcliffe and Mr. Thornton remarked that Sir Charles was in higher spirits than usual.

Luncheon over, croquet was resumed, and kept up till six o'clock, when the visitors departed, and our friends returned to Hazlemere to dinner.

Sir Charles drove May in a mail phaeton which he had just launched. There was another dinner party that day, graced by all the pretty girls who had dined there the day before, together with three or four others, and a very lively dinner it was, for the champagne flowed freely. Music and dancing followed as before. Plans were made for next day—never, alas! to be realised.

When the moment for separation came the dread presentiment which Sir Charles had hitherto repressed again forced itself upon him. He could scarcely bid her adieu. She, too, felt saddened—and so they parted for ever!

Anxious to hide his emotion, Sir Charles sprang into the mail phaeton, that was waiting for him at the

hall-door. He was quickly followed by Colonel Delacombe, who had agreed to return with him to Boxgrove. Next moment they dashed off, and kept up the pace so well that within a quarter of an hour they were in sight of the park gates. It was a lovely moonlight night, and the colonel enjoyed the drive immensely. He smoked his cigar quietly, and did not trouble himself to talk much, for Sir Charles did not seem inclined for conversation.

All at once, however, he was roused from the dreamy reverie into which he had fallen. Something startled the horses—he could not tell what—for neither he nor Kennedy, the groom, saw anything, but they both heard Sir Charles exclaim:

“Good God! there it is again!”

At the same moment the horses set off at a furious pace, and soon became unmanageable. Sir Charles, though an admirable whip, could not hold them. Perhaps he was unnerved by what he had seen. On they dashed, tearing the ground with their hoofs, till they reached the lodge-gates, which unluckily had been thrown open.

Accustomed to this entrance, the infuriated animals made an attempt to pass through the gates, but their blind impetuosity brought the carriage in contact with a post and upset the vehicle, throwing out its occupants with great violence.

Colonel Delacombe, though much shaken by the fall, soon regained his legs, and so did Kennedy, but the ill-fated baronet did not move. Roused by the

tremendous crash, the lodge-keeper rushed forth, and, seizing the horses, prevented further mischief.

Attention was now turned to Sir Charles, and on raising him, it became evident that he had sustained frightful injuries about the head. Indeed, the colonel feared that the skull was fractured.

As soon as practicable, the unfortunate man was carried into the lodge and laid upon a bed. He groaned deeply, but could not speak. The colonel tended him like a brother. By his directions, Kennedy mounted one of the horses and rode off to Wootton in quest of Mr. Malham. But before the surgeon arrived the spirit had fled of as gallant a gentleman as ever breathed.

XXV.

How the News was brought to Hazlemere.

THAT night most of the inmates of Hazlemere had retired to rest full of pleasant anticipations of the morrow, but Luff, the butler, and Boston, who slept at the back of the house, were roused from their first slumbers by Kennedy.

The afflicting news was conveyed by the butler to his master and Mr. Thornton, and filled them with consternation. The two gentlemen soon came downstairs, and were preparing to set out for Boxgrove, when they were stopped by the arrival of Mr. Malham, who came to inform them that all was over. Both were stunned by the dreadful intelligence.

"Gracious Heaven!" exclaimed Mr. Thornton, when he regained his speech. "How remarkable that Sir Charles should have just made his will. And how anxious he was that there should be no delay. He might have had a presentiment of his approaching end."

"What a frightful shock it will be to May!" groaned Mr. Radcliffe. "Enough to kill her."

"I hope Colonel Delacombe is not much hurt?" inquired Mr. Thornton of the surgeon.

"A good deal shaken, but otherwise uninjured,"

replied Mr. Malham. "He wished to accompany me, but I prevailed upon him to go up to the hall. It will be better for him to be quiet, though he seems made of iron."

Having fulfilled his sad errand, the surgeon left them, promising to call again early on the morrow. But he was not allowed to quit the house without an interview with Mrs. Sutton. Though as little noise as possible was made, the housekeeper heard certain sounds that alarmed her, and hastily attiring herself, came down-stairs, just in time to catch him. She soon learnt the terrible truth.

"But Colonel Delacombe was with Sir Charles," she cried. "Is he, too, killed?"

"No. Fortunately, he has escaped almost unhurt."

"Fate is unjust," she cried. "Sir Charles ought to have been the one spared."

"Very true. What a dreadful business! Never knew anything so shocking. Poor Sir Charles! killed in the prime of life, and just on the eve of marriage with the girl he adored. Dreadful!"

To his horror the door opened and May came in—a taper in her hand, and looking excessively pale. As it chanced she had not retired to rest, and being alarmed by the disturbance in the house, instead of ringing her bell had come down to see what had happened. On beholding the surgeon, her uneasiness increased.

"You are surprised to find me here at this time of night, Miss Radcliffe," he said. "The fact is——"

"Do not disguise the truth, Mr. Malham," she in-

interrupted. "Sir Charles has been taken suddenly ill. I am sure of it. You have come to tell us so."

"Perhaps it will be best to prepare her," thought the surgeon. "It is strange you should think this, Miss Radcliffe," he observed. "But don't be alarmed, my dear young lady, don't be alarmed."

"Is there any danger?" she asked, with forced calmness.

"In illness there is always a certain danger," he answered, evasively.

"But what is the nature of the attack? Speak plainly. It must have been very sudden. He was perfectly well when he went away."

"Yes, it was very sudden," he replied, glancing at the housekeeper.

The look did not pass unnoticed by May.

"Luff and Boston were in the hall as I came downstairs," she said, "and I heard them talking about an accident. But they hurried off before I could question them. Were they speaking of Sir Charles?"

"Yes, I am sorry to say he has met with an accident——"

"Then my fears are realised," she cried, with a look of so much anguish that the surgeon regretted his words.

But he was spared the necessity of further explanation by Mr. Radcliffe, who, having heard his daughter's voice, hastened to her.

From her looks he thought she had learnt the dreadful truth.

"Heaven sustain you under this dire affliction, my

dear child!" he exclaimed, clasping her to his breast. "Malham has told you all."

"He has told me nothing, papa," she exclaimed. "He has tried to keep the fatal truth from me. But I divined it."

"Alas! my dear child, I cannot hide it from you. You have lost him."

Crying out, as if a shot had pierced her heart, she became insensible in his arms.

"God forgive me! I fear I have killed her, Malham," he cried to the surgeon.

"No, sir—no. The shock could not be otherwise than severe. But it will pass. We must take her up to her room, Mrs. Sutton, and you will remain with her during the night. Do not distress yourself, sir. I will answer for her recovery."

The tender father carried her up-stairs himself. At the door of her chamber he consigned her to the surgeon and the housekeeper, and paced to and fro in the passage till they came forth.

Mr. Malham looked much moved, and Mrs. Sutton was weeping.

"Why have you both left her?" cried Mr. Radcliffe.

"There is nothing to fear," replied the surgeon. "She wishes to be alone—to seek for consolation where she is sure to find it. Your daughter is an angel, sir. Mrs. Sutton will return to her presently. Now take my advice, and go to bed. I will be with you early in the morning."

END OF THE SECOND BOOK.

BOOK III.

THE RIVALS.



I.

The Young Mistress of Boxgrove.

No event could have caused a more painful sensation than the awfully sudden death of Sir Charles Ilminster, occurring as it did under circumstances so peculiarly distressing. Popular with all classes of society, the ill-fated baronet was universally regretted.

It was thought remarkable that he should have endowed his intended bride with the whole of his large fortune on the very day on which he accidentally met his death; but this proved the depth of his attachment to her, and added to the general regret that a cruel fate would not permit their union—a union which no one doubted would have been happy.

To May herself the splendid provision made for her served only to aggravate her sorrow. She understood the motives—inexplicable to others—that had actuated him in making his will so hastily. She recalled every word he had spoken to her, and felt sure he had thought of her at the last.

As her grief, at first overwhelming, began to abate, she was able to realise the position in which Sir Charles's magnificent bequest had placed her. But the wealth she had acquired could not console her, though it might in some degree mitigate the sharpness of her affliction. She loved Boxgrove because he had loved the place,

and because its antique chambers, its galleries, its gardens, and its groves recalled his image. He was laid among his ancestors in the family vault beneath the chapel attached to the Hall, and she daily visited his tomb.

Nothing had been changed at Boxgrove since the house had come into her hands. All the establishment was kept up as it had been in Sir Charles's time. She confided the management of the house to Mr. Thornton and Mrs. Woodcot, who lived with her, and if visitors came she left the old gentleman and her aunt to entertain them. She refused for the present to mix with society, declaring she had lost all taste for it.

But it must not be supposed that she had given way to gloom, and that the secluded life she now led was caused by a morbid feeling of melancholy. Something of her former cheerfulness had returned; and though she had lost the bright look that once belonged to her, and the winning smile that constantly played about her lips had fled, yet the serene and pensive expression of her countenance heightened its interest. She was graver than before. Sorrow had chastened her heart, but not altered the sweetness of her disposition. Aunt Woodcot thought her more charming than ever, and we incline to think that Aunt Woodcot was right. Grandpapa, whose notions of her had become more exalted with the increase of her wealth, hoped that she would eventually take a very high place in society, but he was content to wait. The young

mistress of Boxgrove was now looked upon as the best match in the county, and as nobody supposed she had vowed eternal fidelity to the memory of poor Sir Charles, everybody wondered who would be fortunate enough to obtain her hand. A great deal of court was paid to the Radcliffes as well as to the guardians at Boxgrove, and more than one advantageous offer was quietly declined, without being submitted to the young lady.

Mr. Thornton was extremely well satisfied with his position—and no wonder. Virtually master of a large mansion and a large establishment, he had nothing to do but to study his own comforts, and these he attended to most sedulously.

Aunt Woodcot was equally comfortable. To her, indeed, Boxgrove was a sort of paradise, and her only dread was that she might, one day, be obliged to quit it. Consequently, she was by no means anxious that her niece should marry—unless she married Oswald, of which there seemed little chance. Mrs. Woodcot could now vie with Mrs. Radcliffe, had a carriage entirely at her disposal, and was in fact a person of considerable importance.

To Myrtila, Sir Charles's sudden death had been a great shock. She was sincerely attached to her brother, but the handsome legacy he had left her, in some measure reconciled her to his loss. She rather envied May her large acquisitions, but did not complain of being ill-treated. She came down to see "the young widow," as she called her, but was dreadfully bored by Aunt Woodcot, and found the old house duller and

more like a convent than ever. Consequently she spent most of her time at Hazlemere.

Colonel Delacombe had gone abroad and taken Hilary with him. They were now at Castellamare, near Naples, in the midst of vineyards and orange-groves. Having received a great deal of encouragement from Lady Richborough, the young man was foolish enough to propose to her, and being rejected, was still more foolish to take his rejection to heart. To cure him the colonel took him abroad. It must not be imagined for a moment that the colonel and Myrtille had quarrelled. They were on as friendly terms as ever, and kept up a constant correspondence.

Knowing they would interest her, Lady Richborough showed Mrs. Radcliffe several of the colonel's letters, in all of which he spoke of Hilary with great affection. In the last that had come to hand he told her that the young man was perfectly cured of his foolish passion. "But I am half afraid," he added, "that he has fallen desperately in love with a fascinating Neapolitan countess, who is staying at the same hotel with us."

"Not very flattering to me," remarked Myrtille. "But I am glad to hear it, nevertheless."

"I fancied you liked him," said Mrs. Radcliffe.

"Not well enough to marry him. I wonder why men will propose to me. They ought to know better. I have no idea of given up my liberty. Were I in May's position, and mistress of Boxgrove, nothing should induce me to marry."

"I don't think she will," observed Mrs. Radcliffe. "She is inconsolable."

"Inconsolable! I don't believe that. Her fidelity will be put to the test pretty severely by-and-by, you may depend upon it. Plenty of suitors will make their appearance, or I'm very much mistaken, and then we shall see what she will do. By-the-by, did she ever inform you that she had her fortune told at Ascot?"

"She mentioned the circumstance, but did not tell me what the gipsy said."

"It was a singular prediction. I laughed at it then, but I don't know what to think now. It may be fulfilled. Who knows? But to return to the colonel. He inquires if Mrs. Sutton is still with you. I am glad I can tell him she is gone. I won't ask what she did, but I know she was dreadfully mischievous."

"The mischief she has made can never be set right, I fear. Mr. Radcliffe has never been like himself since she poisoned his mind by her falsehoods. To me she behaved infamously. I treated her like a friend, not as a servant, and gave her my entire confidence. She requited me with the basest ingratitude."

"Have you never discovered the motives of her malice? I know enough of her history to be able to enlighten you as to them. You inadvertently committed a great error in taking her into the house. I am certain she has all along nourished feelings of jealous dislike to you. The colonel's appearance roused these feelings into activity, and unluckily, as it seems,

you have placed yourself sufficiently in her power to enable her to do you an injury."

"What has she to do with the colonel?" cried Mrs. Radcliffe, startled. "I thought they were utter strangers to each other."

"Strangers!" echoed Myrtila. "He knew her long before he knew you."

"Was she his mistress?"

"His *wife*," replied Lady Richborough. "And Hilary is their son. Now you must understand it all?"

"I do, I do," cried Mrs. Radcliffe. "I understand it too well."

"You must not do him an injustice. When he sought your hand, he believed that death had freed him from the chain which he had so foolishly imposed upon himself. It is due to him that you should be satisfied on this point." And she proceeded to give her the details of the colonel's unfortunate marriage. To these Mrs. Radcliffe listened with the deepest interest.

"Until his return from India he believed the wretched woman dead," said Myrtila, in conclusion; "and you may conceive his horror when he found he had been deceived by a false report. Not the least surprising part of the strange story is that she should be here—with you—and that their son should be brought hither likewise. It looks like fatality."

"Strange, indeed," said Mrs. Radcliffe. "There has always been a certain mystery about Mrs. Sutton,

but if I had known who she was I should have been frightened to death of her."

"What has become of her?" asked Lady Richborough.

"I cannot tell. She left quite suddenly, and contrary to Mr. Radcliffe's wishes. It would seem, however, that she had made preparations for her departure, for her packages were ready, and she left nothing behind her. She proceeded to London, as we suppose, but she has not been heard of since."

"I fear you have not seen the last of her," observed Myrtila. "What a misfortune to be tied to such a wretch!—and I see no chance of the colonel's deliverance. Hilary is not aware that she is his mother, but he must learn the secret one of these days."

"Yes, however disagreeable it may be to the colonel, an explanation *must* be given," observed Mrs. Radcliffe.

The foregoing conversation will afford some notion of the state of things at Hazlemere. Mrs. Sutton was indeed gone, and no tidings had been received of her since her departure. Her loss was a serious grievance to Mrs. Radcliffe, and even the servants regretted her, for she had contrived to secure their good will. But no one regretted her so much as Mr. Malham. He made constant inquiries after her, and vainly tried to ascertain her address.

II.

A Letter from Lady Richborough.

ANOTHER spring has arrived. May Day is again approaching, but no change has yet taken place in the mode of life of the young mistress of Boxgrove. Grandpapa and Aunt Woodcot still reside with her. Mrs. Trapp, poor Sir Charles's housekeeper, who could not brook Mrs. Woodcot's control, has taken Mrs. Sutton's place at Hazlemere. This is the only change in the establishment. There are rarely any visitors, and consequently the house is as quiet as quiet can be—rather too quiet, indeed, for Mr. Thornton. The Radcliffes are almost as much at Boxgrove as Hazlemere. Mr. Radcliffe has never been able to reconcile himself to the loss of Mrs. Sutton. Neither he nor his wife know what has become of her, as she has never written to them since her departure. Her conduct appears strange and inexplicable to Mr. Radcliffe, but does not surprise his wife, who is delighted to be released from the thralldom in which she has so long been kept. She is sometimes tempted to take Mrs. Trapp into her confidence, but warned by previous experience, prudently abstains. Not even to Mrs. Woodcot has she disclosed the secret of Colonel Delacombe's unfortunate marriage, but the thought of it often troubles her. She never hears from the colonel now. All correspondence be-

tween them has ceased. But she obtains tidings of him from Lady Richborough, and is aware that he is still abroad with his adopted son. She is also aware that he has been dangerously ill, having been attacked by fever and ague at Rome, but is now convalescent.

Things were in this state at the two houses, when one day a communication was received by Mrs. Radcliffe from Lady Richborough, which it will be proper to lay before the reader. The letter arrived by the early post while Mrs. Radcliffe was at breakfast, but she did not read it till she was alone in her boudoir.

"You are quite aware, dear Mrs. Radcliffe, that I do not approve of the secluded life that our dear May is leading, and think she ought to assume the position in society to which the large fortune left her by my brother entitles her. A lovely girl, not yet twenty, with the most brilliant prospects before her, cannot be allowed to bury herself alive. Poor Sir Charles would not have demanded such a sacrifice. She has paid the full tribute of regret to his memory, and having an important part to play in the world, cannot shrink from it. Such is my opinion, and such, I feel sure, must also be your opinion.

"I need not remind you of the immense sensation she produced last spring. But for her engagement to poor dear Charlie she would have had no end of offers. Chief among her conquests was Lord Robert Tadcaster, who was desperately smitten. At that time he had nothing beyond his title to recommend him. The

case is very different now, since, as you must be aware, by the demise of his father and elder brother, he has become Marquis of Hartlepool. With princely domains in Berkshire and Kent, two noble country seats, and a splendid house in Arlington-street, the marquis need not look far for a bride. The proudest peer in the realm would be happy to give him his daughter.

"You will guess on whom his choice has fallen. The lovely girl who captivated him last spring still remains mistress of his affections, and he has commissioned me to write to you, and make her a formal offer of his hand.

"A proposal from a nobleman of such distinction as the Marquis of Hartlepool cannot be otherwise than favourably entertained—at least by you and Mr. Radcliffe. I account it a signal honour. But in May's present frame of mind she may be insensible to the importance of the offer, and if left to herself might decline it. It is to prevent the possibility of such a mischance that I now write, urging you to leave nothing undone to bring about a satisfactory result.

"I think you will do better without me than with me; but if you fancy I can be of the slightest use, let me know, and I will run down at once.

"Grandpapa and Aunt Woodcot must exert their influence. Nothing must be neglected. All sorts of good wishes to you all. Adieu!

Your affectionate,

"MYRTILLA.

"P.S. I must not omit to tell you that Colonel Delacombe is in Paris on his way back—much better, though still suffering from the effects of the fever. Hilary is with him. Of course I have told him of Mrs. Sutton's departure, and that nothing has been heard of her since. I shall write to inform him of May's splendid offer. Once more, adieu!"

In an ecstasy of delight, Mrs. Radcliffe rushed down-stairs to communicate the joyful intelligence to her husband. She found him in the library with Mr. Thornton, who had just ridden over from Boxgrove.

"Oh! I am so glad you are here," she cried to her father. "I have such wonderful news for you—and for you too, my dear. What do you think? Our darling May has had an offer from no less a person than the Marquis of Hartlepool."

"Why, he's her old admirer, Lord Robert Tadcaster—only raised to the first rank of the peerage," observed Mr. Thornton. "He was deuced lucky in getting rid of his elder brother, the earl."

"You shall hear what Lady Richborough says about him, for it is through her that the offer has been made," replied Mrs. Radcliffe.

And taking a seat, she read the letter, which produced a great effect upon both her hearers. When she had done, the old gentleman manifested his delight by a chuckling laugh.

"Well, this surpasses my expectations," he cried. "As her ladyship very properly observes, the proposal

of a nobleman of such distinction as the Marquis of Hartlepool is a signal honour."

Mr. Radcliffe was less excited, and quietly remarked, "I feel as much gratified as you do, Mr. Thornton, but——"

"There must be no 'buts' in the case," interrupted the old gentleman. "May *must* accept the marquis."

"Decidedly my opinion," said Mrs. Radcliffe. "There can be no hesitation. Where the interests of the family are concerned, as they are now, she is bound to sacrifice her own feelings. But I do not see that she can raise any objection to her noble suitor. She rather liked him as Lord Robert Tadcaster."

"If she did, which I very much doubt," observed Mr. Radcliffe, "poor Sir Charles did not share her sentiments. I hope she will view the matter in the same light that we do; but I have great misgivings."

"She cannot be allowed to have her own way," cried Mrs. Radcliffe.

"Certainly not," said Mr. Thornton. "Lady Richborough urges me to exert my influence over her, and I shall not fail to do so. But if you exercise your paternal authority, she will not venture to disobey," he added to Mr. Radcliffe.

"I shall simply state my wishes," replied the worthy gentleman. "Personally, I feel honoured by the offer. It would be a proud day to me to see my daughter wedded to the Marquis of Hartlepool, but I will not force her to accept him. As far as I am

concerned, I shall leave the decision entirely to herself."

"I really have no patience with you, my dear," exclaimed Mrs. Radcliffe. "May has been allowed to indulge her grief a great deal too long, and it will be a reproach to us if we allow her to continue in this state of seclusion. I have not as yet interfered with her, because, judging by other people, I naturally concluded that her sorrow would abate, but I see no signs of improvement. I should be as weak as the girl herself if I suffered her to throw away this brilliant chance because she is unwilling to cast off her sentimental sorrow. I shall point out what she ought to do, and insist upon compliance with my injunctions."

Mr. Thornton signified his approval very emphatically.

"You forget, Mr. Radcliffe," pursued the lady, "that May is not yet twenty. Are you justified in allowing her to have her own way?"

"Though under twenty, she is her own mistress, and can act as she pleases," replied Mr. Radcliffe. "If she prefers retirement to splendour; if, from motives which I can appreciate, she declines to marry; I shall not attempt to dissuade her from following her inclinations!"

Mr. Thornton coughed dryly, and winked at his daughter.

"All very fine," cried Mrs. Radcliffe, with a sneer. "But I will do my best to make her Marchioness of Hartlepool."

"And so will I," added the old gentleman.

Mrs. Radcliffe then arose, and intimated her intention of writing to Lady Richborough to thank her for her letter, and tell her how highly honoured they all felt by the marquis's proposal, and that no time should be lost in laying it before May.

"After luncheon," she added, "we will drive over to Boxgrove, and I will then speak to the dear child, and ascertain her sentiments. If I find it necessary, I shall use a little gentle—very gentle—persuasion. Are you going, papa?" she added to Mr. Thornton, who followed her to the door. "Won't you stay luncheon?"

"No," he replied. "I want to astonish Mrs. Woodcot with the wonderful news."

"I'm not sure that she will be pleased," said Mrs. Radcliffe. "But not a word to May till I arrive."

"That is quite understood," rejoined the old gentleman. "Good-bye for the present. We shall meet again anon."

With this he proceeded to the stable, mounted his stout cob, and trotted off to Boxgrove, determined in his own mind that his grand-daughter should become Marchioness of Hartlepool.

III.

Oswald reappears as a Suitor.

ON reaching the mansion, he found, to his surprise, that Oswald had just arrived, and he was a good deal put out by the circumstance, for he knew that Mrs. Woodcot still cherished hopes of securing the great prize for her son.

"What the deuce has brought him here at this juncture?" thought the old gentleman. "He will be confoundedly in the way. I must try to get rid of him."

Oswald was with his mother in a charming little room looking upon the garden, which Mrs. Woodcot had appropriated; and to this room Mr. Thornton at once repaired. He greeted Oswald with his usual cordiality, but expressed surprise at seeing him.

"I am here in obedience to a summons which I received from my mother, sir," replied the young man.

"You have brought a lot of luggage with you, I find," cried his grandsire, rather gruffly. "I suppose you mean to make a long stay."

"I shall only stay as long as I can make myself agreeable, sir," rejoined Oswald. "My mother will explain to you why she sent for me."

"Yes, I have a little project in view for him, and calculate upon your assistance," observed Mrs. Woodcot.

"Before you say any more," interrupted Mr. Thornton, anticipating what was coming, "let me give you a piece of news which I have brought back with me from Hazlemere. The Marquis of Hartlepool has made May a formal proposal of marriage. The offer has been conveyed by Lady Richborough to Mrs. Radcliffe. What do you think of that, eh?"

"What do I think of it?" cried Oswald, in dismay. "I think it an infernal nuisance?"

"Aha!" cried Mr. Thornton. "You have let the cat out of the bag. This spoils your little game, eh?"

"Yes, sir, I rather think it does; and though the proposed alliance may be very dazzling, I cannot doubt that you will give the preference to your own grandson. Surely it will be better to keep this fine place in our own family than relinquish it to a nobleman in whom you have no interest."

"Oswald's claims upon you are superior to those of any other," observed Mrs. Woodcot.

"You seem to forget that he has already been rejected. What likelihood is there that he will be accepted now?"

"Every likelihood, if you will assist me, sir," cried the young man. "None if you support my noble rival."

"You are always sanguine, Oswald," observed his grandsire; "but I don't think you have a ghost of a chance; so you may as well retire from a contest in which you are certain to be worsted."

"Never," cried Oswald. "I am more in love with May than ever."

"With her fortune?" said his grandsire.

"With herself. And I shall esteem you a very unnatural grandfather if you desert me now."

"I have given you plenty of proofs of my affection," said the old gentleman. "I make you a tolerably good allowance. I have constituted you my heir, and if you can find a wife of whom I approve, money shan't stand in the way. But I tell you fairly I can't and won't help you now. This is a most important alliance, and I shall do my best to promote it. We have settled it amongst us, and it is to be."

"I am very sorry to hear it," observed Mrs. Woodcot. "You have very little consideration for May's happiness. Grand though the alliance may be, Boxgrove is too high a price to pay for it."

"I'll hear no more on the subject," said Mr. Thornton, in a positive tone. "Take my advice, Oswald. Propose to Jessie Brooke. She'll suit both of us."

"No, sir, I'll forswear marriage altogether."

"As you please," rejoined his grandsire. "But mark me! not a word to May before her mother's arrival."

And he quitted the room.

"So our scheme's upset," cried Oswald. "The old gentleman is dead against us."

"We are not beaten yet," replied his mother. "In spite of his interdiction, I will speak to May."

On leaving Mrs. Woodcot and her son, Mr. Thorn-

ton, who did not feel altogether easy, put on his hat, and sallied out into the garden. The strong appeal made to him had not been without effect, though he resisted it, but as he walked along the terrace, ever and anon pausing to survey the stately old mansion, or allow his gaze to wander over the park, he could not help feeling that it would be a pity to allow so magnificent a place to go out of the family. Still, he held to his determination.

"No, no," he mentally ejaculated, "I must not hesitate. It is painful to me to thwart Oswald—vexatious to give up this place, but I must do it. May must be Marchioness of Hartlepool."

While thus musing, he saw the young lady herself issue from a yew-tree alley at the farther end of the garden. She was not alone, and either his eyes deceived him or the person with her was Mrs. Sutton. Greatly surprised, he stood still to examine the latter personage more narrowly, and became convinced that he was right. For a minute or two neither of them noticed him, but when they did so, Mrs. Sutton instantly disappeared in the alley. The old gentleman's curiosity was greatly excited by the incident.

May now advanced to meet him. Her deep mourning set off the exquisite fairness of her complexion, and her beauty was not diminished by the shade of sadness that sat upon her brow.

"Good day, dear grandpapa," she said. "I thought you were at Hazlemere."

"Just come back," he rejoined. "Your mamma

will be here by-and-by. She has got famous news for you—but I mustn't forestall it. Pray who was with you just now? Surely it couldn't be Mrs. Sutton, yet it looked uncommonly like her."

"It was Mrs. Sutton," replied May. "But I must entreat you not to mention to mamma or any of them that you have seen her. I have promised that her visit shall be kept secret."

"I suppose I mustn't ask what she has come about?"

"Please don't, for I can't tell you."

"At least, you can tell me why she has never written to your mamma since she left Hazlemere."

"I can answer no questions respecting her," returned May, mysteriously.

"Well, I think, if I were you, I wouldn't encourage her visits. If she must come at all, let her come openly. In any case, don't let her persuade you to engage her as housekeeper. She and your aunt would never get on together."

"Mrs. Sutton has no wish to take the situation, grandpapa, and I should never dream of offering it to her."

"Well, come and sit down with me on this bench. I want to talk to you. It sometimes occurs to me, my dear child," he observed, regarding her earnestly, "that you must be tired of the quiet life you are leading here."

"On the contrary, dear grandpapa, I am perfectly happy—that is, as happy as I can ever hope to be."

she remarked, with a sigh. "I grow fonder of the place every day, and never desire to quit it. All those I love are with me, or come to see me daily, and I care for no other society. I do not find the time pass heavily. As you know, I am always employed, and though sadness will sometimes steal over me, I never give way to gloom. Make yourself easy about me, dear grandpapa. I like this tranquil mode of life, wholly free from excitement, and my only fear is lest something should occur to disturb it."

"All very pretty, but you are too young to retire from the world, and really must return to it. If you were some thirty or forty years older—had entirely lost your charms—had incurred many disappointments—I would not say a word against the course you are pursuing. But you are in the very spring-time of life, when everything wears its brightest and gayest colours—as we may see by glancing at those parterres—and when your spirits ought to be at their best. Grief does not endure for ever. It is not meant that it should do so. Ere long, when the wounds in your heart are fully healed, the image which is now constantly before you will insensibly fade away, and be succeeded by another. New objects of interest will arise, and if you do not forget the past, you will think of it without pain. This is the law of nature, and your case can be no exception to the law."

May sighed, but made no answer, and grandpapa went on:

"You must consider, my dear, that you have

duties to fulfil in connexion with your large property—duties that cannot be neglected. You are bound to occupy a certain position.”

“But you and papa discharge all these duties for me. You know, dear grandpapa, I cannot attend to matters of business, and do not even understand them. Whatever you deem necessary, I will do. Hitherto you have spared me all trouble, and I cannot be sufficiently grateful for your kindness.”

“I do not speak of matters of business, my dear, but of the duties incumbent upon your position. You cannot consistently avoid taking your proper place in society. Already, I and your aunt have been blamed for allowing you to immure yourself so long—you know with what justice. I can no longer, therefore, forbear to remonstrate. The idea may be repugnant to your present feelings, but since with your large fortune you are not likely to remain single, let me counsel you to marry a man of rank—of *high rank*. You *can* do it. Think over what I have said.”

So saying, he got up and marched off at a quick pace towards the farther end of the garden.

May was ruminating over his words, and wondering whether they had any special significance, when she was joined by her aunt, who came out to tell her that Oswald had unexpectedly arrived.

“But you look unusually sad, my love,” said Mrs. Woodcot, with an air of much concern. “What distresses you? You know you can confide all your little griefs to me.”

"I fear I do not make you and grandpapa as comfortable as I desire," replied May. "Is there anything I can do for you? Only tell me, and it shall be done."

"You perfectly astonish me, my love. Surely your grandpapa has not been complaining? He sometimes grumbles without reason."

"No, aunty dear, he has not been complaining. But he does not seem quite satisfied with me, and I am sure I am most anxious to please him."

"You must have misapprehended him, my love. What has he been saying to you?"

"He says that people blame you and him for allowing me to lead so retired a life, and that you ought to force me to go into society. Now society, as you know, dear aunty, is utterly distasteful to me. I am not equal to it. Not content with dragging me back to the world, he would have me marry."

"I, too, would have you marry, my love," said Mrs. Woodcot. "And that before long."

"Perhaps you would have me marry a nobleman. You think that rank would make me happy?"

"No, I don't say that. Splendour, I know, has few attractions for you. Besides, your position is already ensured, and your fortune so large that you require no addition to it. Circumstanced as you are, the choice of a husband rests with yourself, and, to ensure your happiness, you ought to choose one whom you know to be devoted to you, with whose character

and disposition you are perfectly acquainted, and whose tastes are not dissimilar to your own."

"Such a one as Oswald," remarked May, with a smile.

"Exactly," rejoined Mrs. Woodcot. "Of all your adorers there is none truer to you than he. He submitted to the sentence that you passed upon him without a murmur—but he never ceased to love. And now—with my permission—he ventures to come forward again."

May uttered an exclamation of displeasure.

"Forgive me, if I have done wrong, my love, in summoning him; but knowing there was likely to be a question of marriage, I could not help giving the poor fellow a chance. Ah! he loves you dearly, May."

"What do you mean by a question of marriage, aunt?" asked May, uneasily.

"You will learn that soon enough," returned Mrs. Woodcot.

"But I suppose a husband is not to be forced upon me!"

"You are your own mistress, my love, and can do as you please. If you think I have presumed too much in regard to Oswald, I will send him away at once."

"No, don't do that, aunt. He doesn't trouble me in the least. I fear there is some one else who cannot be disposed of so easily."

"Pray don't ask me any more questions, my love. I have told you more than I ought. Thank you a thousand times for permitting Oswald to remain."

"No thanks are due, for I cannot give him a hope. Tell him so, aunty. Ah! here he comes," she exclaimed, as the young man was seen advancing towards them along the terrace.

May received him with unaffected kindness, and really appeared glad to see him, but after a little conversation on general matters, she excused herself and went into the house.

"A very affectionate greeting from my fair cousin," observed Oswald, as soon as she was gone. "I hope I may draw a favourable conclusion from it. Have you said anything to her?"

"Yes, I have opened the business."

"Well!"

"You are allowed to remain—that's something."

"Everything," he cried, exultingly. "With your help, mother, I'll win her."

"Don't be too sanguine, Oswald. We shall have to contend with them all. We shall see what effect your aunt Radcliffe produces with the Marquis of Hartlepool."

IV.

A Secret Divulged.

LATER on in the day, a long interview took place between Mrs. Radcliffe and May, and when the former issued from the room in which she had been closeted with her daughter, she looked flushed and angry, and, in answer to her husband's inquiries, told him to go to the wayward girl, and see what he could do with her. Mr. Radcliffe at once obeyed the mandate.

"Your mamma has sent me to you, my love," he said, as he entered the room, "to reinforce the arguments she has used in favour of the splendid offer that has just been made you, but I wish you at once to understand that I shall leave you entirely to follow the dictates of your own heart."

"Thank you, dearest papa. This is only what I expected from you. Without reference to this particular proposal—the importance of which I feel as much as mamma or yourself—I wish to ask you a question: do you think I ought to marry?"

"I have no hesitation in answering the question in the affirmative," he replied. "I think you ought. Your long and utter seclusion from society has given me, I will now confess, considerable uneasiness, and I shall rejoice at your restoration to the world. I shall rejoice still more to see you wedded to one deserving of you,

and on whom you can bestow your affections. In the choice you may make, consult your own feelings, and do not be governed by our wishes. Much may be said in favour of the present offer, and if rank and splendour weigh with you, accept the Marquis of Hartlepool. But I question whether you would not be happier with one of less exalted position. However, decide for yourself. You look as if you had something to say to me," he added, in a kind and encouraging tone.

May remained silent. The colour mounted to her cheeks, but she soon became pale again.

"Speak, my dear child—speak," he said. "You need have no secrets from me."

"I will make a full confession to you, dearest papa," she rejoined. "I will let you know the exact state of my feelings. But I fear you will be displeased."

"Have no such fear," he rejoined, kindly.

Taking a small velvet tabouret, she knelt down upon it beside him, and looked up into his face.

"You look like my child of former days!" he cried, pressing his lips to her fair brow.

"I would go back to former days," she rejoined. "You may remember, dearest papa, that at first I was strangely insensible to Sir Charles's noble qualities and devotion. I was blinded by a feeling for another which had taken possession of me. Fortunately, I was able to crush it. But of late that feeling has revived, and unless I can conquer it as I did before, it will overpower my resolutions, and in spite of myself I shall love again."

"You are in love already, I perceive," he observed, smiling. "Well, who has resumed his mastery over your heart?"

"I will have no concealment from you, dearest papa. The person whose image will recur to me in spite of all my efforts to banish it, is Hilary St. Ives—Colonel Delacombe's adopted son."

"Ha!" exclaimed her father, as if a bullet had pierced his breast, while May, surprised and alarmed at the extreme agitation he displayed, regretted having divulged her secret.

"Have you seen him?" cried the agonised father. "Have you had any communication with him? Is he aware of the state of your feelings towards him?"

"How is that possible, dearest papa? He has been abroad, as you know, for many months, and during the whole of that time I have neither heard from him nor written to him. He was never aware that I took the slightest interest in him."

"Thank Heaven!" exclaimed Mr. Radcliffe, greatly relieved. "You must think of him no more, May."

"Your prohibition is strangely at variance with your late kind expressions. You said I ought to consult my own feelings."

"But I never dreamed of this young man, or I should have warned you against him. I warn you now," he cried, solemnly. "There are reasons why you can never marry him."

"What are they, papa?"

"I can enter into no explanation," he rejoined, with a sternness to which she was wholly unaccustomed.

"But, dearest papa, tell me your objections to him. Perhaps they can be removed."

"Never!—they never can be removed. Banish every thought of him. If you would not incur my serious displeasure, May, you will never mention his name again."

Then pushing her from him, he arose, and muttered to himself, "What have I done to deserve this torture?—why should I be placed in this cruel situation?"

She watched him with alarm, unable to comprehend the cause of his violent emotion, but confident in his love she came softly towards him, and took his hand.

"There is something more in this than the circumstances warrant," she said, looking entreatingly at him. "Tell me, I beseech you, what it is."

"I cannot," he replied, emphatically. "The subject is too painful to be further discussed. My sentiments have totally changed since our converse began. I am now of opinion that you ought to accept the splendid offer you have received."

"But, papa, I do not love the marquis, and do not care for the title."

"Love will come in time, and the title will gratify my pride. That ought to be sufficient for you. It is my wish that you should become Marchioness of Hartlepool."

"I have never disobeyed you, dearest papa——"

"Then obey me now."

And he quitted the room, leaving her in a state almost of stupefaction at his inexplicable conduct.

V.

Mrs. Sutton's Confession.

THAT day May could not follow her ordinary occupations. Her mind was unsettled, and it seemed as if she had quite lost the serenity which she had only recently regained.

To one person only could she confide her griefs, and towards evening she went in search of her.

Quitting the garden, where she had been walking by herself for some time, she entered the park, and, descending the slopes, tracked a path which led her through a grove of chesnuts, and eventually brought her to a private gate, through which she passed out into the road.

Descending the hill, she soon reached her destination—a secluded little cottage, standing by the roadside, covered by roses and eglantines.

This humble dwelling was occupied by an old dame, one of her pensioners, but it was not to see Widow Perrins that she had come thither. Her approach was perceived by some one inside, and as she drew near the door was opened by Mrs. Sutton, who expressed great pleasure at seeing her, and ushered her into a little room, which was furnished very simply, but looked extremely clean and tidy.

“How very kind of you, dear, to come and see

me," said Mrs. Sutton, offering her a seat. "I have been expecting you all day. Dame Perrins is in her own room, and won't disturb us. You can talk freely, for, as you know, she is so deaf that she can't hear a word we say. I perceive from your looks that you have something to tell me. If you want advice, be sure I will give you the best in my power."

"I am very unhappy, Sutton," replied May—"very unhappy indeed. But I know that I shall obtain from my dear old nurse, who loves me as fondly as ever, the sympathy which every one else denies me."

And she then proceeded to relate circumstantially all that had occurred—describing her mother's displeasure at her unwillingness to accept the Marquis of Hartlepool's offer, and her father's explosion of rage at her confession of a secret love for Hilary—to all of which Mrs. Sutton listened with profound interest.

"You will now understand why I am so unhappy, dear Sutton," said May, in conclusion. "I know not what to do. My desire is to live at Boxgrove quietly—but they will not let me rest. Whether I shall have strength to resist the combination against me, I cannot tell. I fear not. Papa, upon whose support I counted, deserts me. As I have told you, he authoritatively enjoins me to abandon all idea of Hilary. What can be his motive for the prohibition I cannot tell, but I am sure he is inflexible."

"I will explain his motive," replied Mrs. Sutton, after a pause. "There must be no further concealment. You will abhor me when you learn what I have done.

I am the cause of your father's antipathy to Hilary. I have poisoned his mind—made him believe that the young man is too nearly allied to you ever to be your husband—in a word, that his mother is your mother.”

Shocked beyond all expression, May could scarcely credit what she had heard. For some moments she could not speak, but at last she exclaimed,

“Oh, Sutton, if any one but yourself had told me this, I would not have believed it. What instigated you to such dreadful wickedness?”

“Jealousy. I always hated your mother.”

May looked at her with amazement.

“And you avow this to me, who know that mamma showed you nothing but kindness.”

“Her kindness increased my hatred. My nature is evil. Having the means of vengeance in my power, I used them as I have told you. The charge was false in every way—doubly false from me.”

“Why from you?” demanded May, appalled by her language and demeanour.

“Because the young man in question is my own son,” replied Mrs. Sutton.

“Your son!” exclaimed May, horror-stricken, and sinking back in the chair.

“Oh! if you knew the terrible remorse I have felt for my crime, you would pity and perhaps forgive me,” exclaimed the wretched woman.

“Expect neither pity nor forgiveness from me,” cried May, shuddering as she regarded her. “The incalculable misery you have caused would check any

such feelings. But answer me one question. You have declared that Hilary is your son. Were you married to his father?"

"As Heaven shall judge me—yes! It was a secret marriage, and productive of nothing but misery both to myself and to him I had wedded. He thought me beneath him, and was ashamed of me. But he knew not, and knows not to this hour, that my family is better than his own. I would willingly draw a veil over this portion of my unhappy life. But I must refer to it. Not many months after my marriage my husband left me. I knew he would never return. I knew I had not his love. I knew he wished to get rid of me, for he had told me so, and I was just as anxious to be freed from him. I devised a plan which would liberate us from our fetters without scandal. It was to disappear from the world. My stratagem succeeded. He believed I was drowned in the Severn, and his belief remained unshaken till we met again after many years, and he recognised in Mrs. Sutton, the housekeeper, the wife he had supposed long since dead."

Astounded by the revelations made her, May remained silent for some minutes.

"But you have not spoken of your infant son," she said. "How could you abandon him? Had you no mother's feelings in your breast?"

"The sufferings I have endured may, perhaps, serve to expiate my unnatural conduct," rejoined the wretched woman. "I knew the child was cared for by its father; but though I did not dare to make any direct inquiries

from the persons to whom it had been entrusted, I ascertained that it was well treated. I did more—but alas! not all I might have done. I left my poor child to strangers, but they were kinder to him than his unnatural mother.”

Here her utterance was broken by sobs, and she was quite overcome by emotion.

“You say that your family is better than that of Colonel Delacombe,” observed May.

“I have spoken the truth,” replied Mrs. Sutton. “But what does that matter now?”

“It matters much to your son,” replied May.

“He shall know all it may be needful for him to learn,” rejoined the inscrutable woman, “but there are some things I cannot—will not tell him. I have forfeited the right to claim him as a son.”

“How so?” cried May, in fresh perplexity.

Mrs. Sutton did not heed the question, but continued almost fiercely,

“Imagine the torments I experience when I know and feel that I am for ever debarred from a mother’s privileges. The ardent love I bear my son will never be gratified. When I have stood beside him the effort to stifle my feelings has well nigh killed me. It has been said—said falsely—that the voice of nature will always speak out. In him it was mute. Once, when he slept, I pressed my lips to his brow. That is the sole solace my mother’s heart has known. I thought he could read my feelings in my looks—but no! no! he was utterly insensible. I would give the residue of

my life for a few words from him; but I shall never have it. I do not deserve it. It is retribution—retribution.”

She pressed her hands to her eyes, and when she uncovered her face, it was ghastly white.

“I shall never know peace on earth,” she exclaimed. “Life has become a burden to me, and the sooner it is ended the better. I am only in the way.”

Her utter despair excited May’s compassion, and she attempted to offer some consolation, but the wretched woman refused to be comforted.

Ere long, however, she mastered her emotion, and spoke more calmly.

“I dare not advise you,” she said. “Good counsel cannot proceed from lips like mine—but your life has been so pure and blameless that you are certain to meet your reward—just as I have met mine for my evil deeds. Obey your father—would I had obeyed mine!—obey him, I exhort you, as you would be happy, for disobedience will bring down a judgment. Tell him all I have told you. Hide nothing from him. If he then consents to your marriage with Hilary, all will be well. If he forbids it—yield!”

While they had been thus occupied, evening had come on, and it was now almost dark.

So engrossed were they that neither of them had remarked that a listener was outside, who had lost not a word of their discourse. A man, who looked like a gipsy, had watched May enter the cottage, and stealing up to the little lattice window, which, as we have

intimated, was covered by creepers, and which unluckily was left partially open, had planted himself so that he could see and hear what was going on inside.

What he heard interested him deeply, and he never quitted his post till May, remarking that it was growing late, signified her intention of returning.

He then crept off, but concealed himself among some trees on the opposite side of the road.

Here he remained perdu till May came forth with Mrs. Sutton, who had insisted on attending her to the hall, and he then cautiously followed them.

Followed them through the gate into the park, and through the chesnut grove, where the shade of the trees made it sombre.

May had no fears. But fancying she heard footsteps, she grasped her companion's arm, and the latter immediately stopped. They listened for a moment or two, but nothing occurring to alarm them, they set off again.

Still the man followed.

As they issued from the grove, the old mansion rose before them in all its grandeur, with a crescent moon hanging over its summit, tipping the vanes with silver.

Even at that hour, and imperfectly seen, the park looked lovely, and as May looked down the long sweeping glade, she could just descry the branching antlers of the deer, showing where they were couched beneath the trees.

In a very short space of time they had reached the

garden, and Mrs. Sutton's attendance being no longer required, she prepared to take leave.

During the rapid walk she had scarcely made an observation, but now she had evidently something to say, but profound emotion prevented her from giving utterance to it.

"I must now bid you adieu, Sutton," said May. "I feel certain papa will desire an interview with you; and if he does, you will not disappoint him, will you?"

"If he wishes to see me I will come—*if I can*," she replied, with strange significance.

"Banish these gloomy thoughts!" cried May. "Much happiness, I trust, is yet in store for you."

"No," she replied, in a tone that sounded like a knell—"no chance of happiness for me on earth."

And she hurried away.

May gazed after her, and could just distinguish that she waved her hand, before she disappeared among the trees.

As May hastened towards the house, a scream was heard, apparently proceeding from the chesnut grove. She listened intently, but there was no second cry.

Just then a gardener came up. He had heard no scream, but instantly ran off to the chesnut grove. In less than ten minutes he came back with the assurance that her alarm was groundless. He had been as far as the gate, and had seen no one.

Early next morning, May, who could not free herself from uneasiness, set out to make inquiries con-

cerning Mrs. Sutton. The morning was so exquisite that it might have tempted her forth, even if she had had no particular object in view. Everything wore a smiling aspect, the charming old-fashioned garden, with its smooth lawns, its variegated flower-beds, and its alleys—the park with its long glades, its clumps of trees and thickets. The deer were trooping down the slopes, the rooks cawing loudly in the trees, and the groves vocal with melody. The exhilarating feeling which such a morning always inspires did not fail in its effect on May.

Heedless of the heavy dew upon the sward, she speeded towards the chesnut grove, but before reaching it she was cheered by the sight of Mrs. Sutton, and quickened her pace to meet her.

“Oh, Sutton,” she exclaimed, “I am so glad to see you safe and well. After you left me last night, I heard a scream, and fancied it might proceed from you.”

“Yes. A ruffian stopped me in the grove, and threatened me, but fled when I cried out for help. I have not yet recovered from the fright he caused me. The villain had been lurking near the cottage, and overheard what passed between us. His motive for stopping me was to extort money. I defied him, and he threatened me. But it will not be safe for me to remain longer here. I was coming in search of you to tell you this. I thought I should find you in the garden.”

"But what have you to fear from this villain, Sutton? He will not dare to molest you further."

"No, I cannot remain," she replied. "I dare not. I know not whither I shall go. I have no fixed plan. But I will write and let you know where a letter will reach me."

"Come with me to the house now, and await papa's arrival. He will be here this morning. You can then give him the necessary explanation."

"No, not now," she rejoined. "It would be hazardous for me to remain here." And she added, hastily, "I shrink from a meeting with your mother, and I could scarcely avoid encountering her."

At this moment a blithe shout was heard. It proceeded from Oswald, who had just issued forth into the park, and descried them. On seeing him Mrs. Sutton bade the young lady a hurried farewell, and plunged into the grove.

Luckily Oswald had not recognised Mrs. Sutton. Besides, he was too eager to take advantage of the opportunity now offered him to waste a moment in idle discourse.

Poor fellow! he went over the old ground—made the same protestations of undying affection that he made a year ago, and with pretty nearly the same result—the only difference being that May did not laugh at him as she used to do formerly, but, on the contrary, looked grave.

Still he would not be discouraged, but implored her so earnestly and so humbly to accord him a few

days' grace, and not reject him summarily, that she assented.

"Give me a week," he cried. "At the end of that time, if you do not change your mind, I will retire for ever. But promise not to accept any one else in the interim."

"You have no right to ask for such a promise, Oswald," she replied. "Nevertheless, I give it."

Transported with delight, he took her hand, and would have kissed it, if he had dared.

"You must not presume upon my good nature, Oswald," she said, coldly. "I do not give you a hope."

He did not hazard a reply, lest he should mar his prospects, which he thought were brightening.

VI.

The Marquis of Hartlepool.

MRS. RADCLIFFE'S letter (as perhaps was intended by the writer) was forwarded by Lady Richborough to the Marquis of Hartlepool, accompanied by a little billet from her ladyship, recommending him to go down to Hazlemere, and carry on his suit in person, and assuring him that the Radcliffes would be delighted to see him.

The marquis acted upon the advice, and, having previously written to announce his coming, was received by Mr. Radcliffe with all the consideration due to his high rank. Of course, preparations had been made for him, and a few of the best people in the neighbourhood were invited to meet him at dinner.

From her previous acquaintance with the marquis's character, Mrs. Radcliffe had been rather alarmed at the idea of having him as a guest, but he soon set her at her ease. All prejudices against him on the score of coxcombry were speedily dispelled. No longer haughty and supercilious, his manner was almost captivating; while his personal appearance seemed also improved, and Mrs. Radcliffe wondered how she could ever have thought him otherwise than handsome.

Mr. Radcliffe, who had certainly no predilection for him, was not proof against the charm of his man-

ner, but confessed to Mr. Thornton that he was most agreeably surprised.

But the marquis's most signal triumph was over Oswald; who dined that day Hazlemere, and was forced to admit that his noble rival was a most agreeable person. It is true that the marquis paid him particular attention, and flattered his vanity.

Lady Richborough had arrived just before dinner, having received a telegraphic message from Mrs. Radcliffe begging her to come down, and though she had engagements in town, she good-naturedly gave them up, and complied.

One person, however, successfully resisted the marquis's fascinations, and viewed his conduct with a jaundiced eye. Miss Woodcot felt angry with Oswald for allowing himself to be seduced by his rival's manner, and prepared to give him a severe lecture for his folly when they were alone.

Needless, we think, to state that May was not present. No persuasions could induce her to join the dinner, but she reluctantly consented to receive the marquis on the following day at Boxgrove.

After dinner the marquis had a long tête-à-tête with the lady of the house, and told her how passionately enamoured he was of her daughter. Mrs. Radcliffe gave him every encouragement in her power, and almost ventured to answer for May. With the prestige of his high rank, his charming manner, and genuine passion, she thought he must prove irresistible.

Grandpapa was in a state of perfect beatitude as

he drove back that night to Boxgrove, and could not find terms sufficiently strong to express his admiration of the marquis.

Mrs. Woodcot ventured to differ with him, but was put down instantly, and Oswald was bidden to hold his tongue, unless he could say something to the purpose.

"I won't hear a word against him," cried Mr. Thornton. "He is the best specimen of a nobleman I ever met with. May is the luckiest girl alive to have secured him, and I shall be the proudest old fellow in England when I am grandfather—as I soon shall be—to the Marchioness of Hartlepool—ha! ha! ha!"

It will be seen that our convivial old friend had not neglected the claret.

So far everything seemed propitious to the marquis. The affair was in excellent train, and promised a most satisfactory result. Never had Mrs. Radcliffe been in better spirits than at breakfast on the following morning. She had almost reached the height of her ambition, and could scarcely contain her delight. Her great desire now was that May should be married without delay.

About noon, an open carriage conveyed the whole party to Boxgrove. The day was singularly auspicious, and the park could not possibly have been seen to greater advantage.

The marquis was enraptured by its beauty. He had two large parks of his own, but neither of them could be compared to this magnificent domain. Lady

Richborough, who was with Mrs. Radcliffe in the barouche, excited his enthusiasm by pointing out the chief beauties of the place, and drew his attention to some of the oldest trees.

They were still slowly mounting the steep hill, when May, who was taking her exercise in the park, accompanied by Oswald and grandpapa, rode towards them, and with infinite grace and courtesy welcomed her visitor.

The marquis was a little disconcerted by this unexpected meeting, having prepared himself for a more ceremonious reception, but he did not allow his disappointment to appear.

Unluckily the fine speeches he intended to deliver had to be postponed to a more fitting opportunity, and he was obliged to confine himself to commonplace observations. However, he rattled away in a very lively manner, and if he did not interest May, he amused her.

The young lady rode by the side of the carriage as far as the gates, and then left her noble suitor to the care of grandpapa, and continued her exercise in the park; nor did she reappear till the gong had sounded for luncheon. In his efforts to please her, the marquis was materially aided by Myrtilla, but though he exerted himself to the utmost, he felt that he had not made much progress.

Both Mrs. Radcliffe and Lady Richborough were convinced that May would not grant him the tête-à-tête he so ardently desired, and they therefore agreed

to contrive it. But Oswald was on the alert to defeat their object.

After luncheon, Myrtilla suggested that they should visit the gallery, the marquis having expressed a wish to see the family portraits. Of course May assented, and they all repaired thither.

Naturally familiar with the histories of her ancestors and ancestresses, Lady Richborough described several of the portraits, but seizing an opportunity when May was engaged in conversation with the marquis, she made her escape, and left them together.

The precious moment was not lost. Instantly changing his discourse, the marquis began to plead his suit in impassioned terms, but before he had ended, Oswald joined them, and, regardless of the annoyance which he evidently caused his noble rival, remained.

VII.

An unexpected Arrival.

WHILE the little incident just narrated took place in the portrait-gallery, a stranger had arrived at the mansion.

A tall, dark-complexioned, good-looking young man, well-dressed, and of distinguished appearance. He inquired for Lady Richborough, stating that he had been to Hazlemere, but not finding her, had walked on to Boxgrove. He then gave Mr. Dancer, the butler, a letter, requesting him to deliver it to her ladyship, and say that the bearer, Mr. Hilary St. Ives, begged the favour of an interview with her.

Mr. Dancer bowed most respectfully, and conducting him to the library, left him there, and proceeded on his errand.

Now it chanced, at the moment Mr. Dancer entered the gallery, that Lady Richborough was engaged in conversation with the marquis, and not wishing to disturb her, the butler did not immediately go forward, and while thus stationed attracted May's attention. Fancying he wanted to speak to her, she went towards him, and on hearing his errand hastened down to the library, without staying to make any excuses to the marquis for her sudden disappearance.

She found Hilary standing near the open French window, looking out upon the smooth lawn and the lovely parterres. He bowed formally as he advanced to meet her.

"I am aware that you expected to see Lady Richborough, Mr. St. Ives," she said, saluting him. "I have hurried down before her because I have something to say to you."

"I feel much flattered," he replied, again bowing gravely. "I did not suppose that I lived in your recollection."

"I never forget those I have known and at all cared for," she rejoined; "and there are circumstances connected with your brief stay at Hazlemere which will always make me take an interest in you. I hope you bring good accounts of Colonel Delacombe."

"Alas! no, I am sorry to say," he replied, sadly. "He is detained in Paris by a fresh attack of the low fever which he caught at Rome. He is most anxious to return to England, but his physician will not allow him to move at present. He has, therefore, despatched me to transact some business for him, and amongst other things has charged me with a letter to Lady Richborough, which must plead my excuse for my present intrusion."

"May I ask if the letter you have brought relates in any way to Mrs. Sutton? You can speak freely to me."

"I am not acquainted with its exact contents, but I know it refers to some important information which

the colonel hopes that her ladyship may be instrumental in obtaining from Mrs. Sutton."

"Are you aware that Mrs. Sutton has left Hazlemere?"

"Yes. But Colonel Delacombe thinks that Lady Richborough, or your mother, may enable me to discover her retreat."

"Neither of them can enable you to discover it," rejoined May.

"Then my object is frustrated," he cried, with a look of deep disappointment.

"Perhaps I can help you to find her," said May. "But do not let me raise your hopes too highly. There are difficulties in the way, as you will perceive. I must tell you in confidence, that for some weeks Mrs. Sutton has been living in absolute retirement in a secluded little cottage near the park—with my consent and with my knowledge. But she intended to leave yesterday. She had a motive for her sudden departure, and refused to tell me whither she was going; but I think she will write to me soon."

"Possibly she may not yet have left," cried Hilary, eagerly. "It is important that I should see her without delay. Will you direct me to the cottage?"

"Readily. It is situated on the skirts of the park, close to the large chesnut grove on the left, which you can see from this window, and is occupied by Widow Perrins. You must tell the old dame that I have sent you, or you will learn nothing from her."

"I will return immediately," said Hilary. "Pray make my excuses to Lady Richborough."

Passing through the open window, he stepped out upon the lawn, and gained the terrace, when a loud halloo checked him, and turning he perceived Mr. Radcliffe.

"What the devil are you doing here, sir?" vociferated that gentleman. "Stop, and give an account of yourself."

Though disinclined to obey, Hilary nevertheless halted.

"Lady Richborough or your daughter will acquaint you with my business here, sir," he remarked, haughtily.

"Ah, indeed! Pray have you seen Miss Radcliffe?"

"I have had that honour, sir," replied the young man. "I must beg you to excuse me just now. I am in haste. On my return, I shall be at your disposal."

"You must not return, sir. I cannot allow you to see my daughter again. I cannot allow you to re-enter the house. Am I sufficiently explicit?—or must I warn you of the premises?"

"Warn me off the premises!" cried Hilary, fiercely. "You now effectually prevent my departure. I do not propose to leave at your bidding. Till this moment I was under the impression that Miss Radcliffe was mistress of Boxgrove, but it seems that you exercise paramount authority here."

"As Miss Radcliffe's father, I am the best judge of those whom she ought to receive. I disapprove of you, sir, and therefore peremptorily forbid your return. With my sanction you should never have entered the house."

"Mr. Radcliffe," said Hilary, sternly, "I cannot believe you capable of acting in this extraordinary manner without some provocation. Having given you none, I seek in vain for a motive for your excessive rudeness, but as a gentleman you owe me an explanation, and shall render it."

"Perhaps I have spoken too strongly," replied the other, moderating his tone. "Let me, then, say that your presence here is calculated not merely to cause me annoyance, but great pain."

"I understand it now," thought Hilary. "He has discovered the terrible secret."

All anger at once disappeared from the young man's countenance, and gave place to profound sympathy.

"You have said enough, Mr. Radcliffe," he observed. "I will obey you. When you learn my motive for coming here from Lady Richborough, you will not blame me. Let me assure you—since it may be a satisfaction to you to know it—that I did not seek an interview with your daughter. It was by accident that I saw her, and the few words that passed between us referred to Mrs. Sutton, of whom I am in search."

"You are in search of Mrs. Sutton!" cried Mr. Radcliffe, quickly. "With what object?"

"Pardon me, sir. I cannot satisfy your curiosity."

"Have you heard from her? Do you know where she is?"

"I have come here for information respecting her."

"We know nothing of her. She has left Hazlemere several months ago. I have made many fruitless attempts to find her."

"Perhaps I may be more fortunate," said the young man, raising his hat. "I wish you good day, sir."

Mr. Radcliffe did not attempt to stop him, for at the moment May and Lady Richborough issued forth from the library window.

"What have you done with Mr. St. Ives, sir?" said her ladyship, as she came up. "He has brought me a letter which requires an answer."

"He will be back presently," observed May.

"I don't think he will," said Mr. Radcliffe. "I shall be very much surprised if he makes his appearance here again."

"What have you said to him, papa?" cried May, in consternation.

"Quite enough to prevent his return," remarked Mr. Radcliffe, drily. "I have a decided objection to the young man. Besides, his appearance at this juncture is excessively inopportune."

"Yes, I quite admit that," observed Myrtille. "And perhaps it is as well he is gone. He might have caused some unpleasantness. You must really take

your daughter to task, Mr. Radcliffe. She has behaved infamously, and if the marquis were not the most amiable creature alive, and devotedly attached to her, he could not fail to have taken offence."

"What have I done?" said May.

"Everything in your power to defeat our plans. You almost show the marquis that you are indifferent to him. You will not grant him a tête-à-tête. You allow that grand brouillon, Oswald, to interrupt him, just as he is making a declaration; and when I have set matters straight you run away from him altogether."

"My excuse is that I wished to speak to Mr. St. Ives," replied May.

"Will your ladyship now blame me for dismissing the young man so unceremoniously?" cried Mr. Radcliffe.

"Far from it. I think you acted very properly—very judiciously. Really, my love, we have had rather too much nonsense this morning. It is time to be a little sensible. Perhaps you may not have any very strong liking for the Marquis of Hartlepool—nor is it absolutely necessary that you should be in love with him—but you must allow that he is very agreeable, and if not positively handsome, is the next thing to it. He has a thousand recommendations, which I could enumerate if I had time, but they may be all summed up in the fact that he has the power of making you a marchioness. We all desire the alliance—papa, mamma, grandpapa, myself—we all urge it—and if you prove

rebellious, we shall insist—yes, insist upon compliance with our wishes. Have I said more than I ought, Mr. Radcliffe?”

“Not a word,” he rejoined. “I hoped that a very different reception would have been given to the marquis.” Then turning to May, he added authoritatively, “If you refuse him, I will never forgive you.”

Disregarding her entreating looks, he walked away.

“You must extricate me from this dilemma, Myrtilla,” cried May. “I will not be forced into a marriage against my inclinations.”

“Don’t expect the slightest sympathy from me, my love. I am dead against you. You are in no dilemma. Your course is perfectly clear; and everybody, except Oswald and his mother, will blame you if you do not take it. But here comes the marquis. Attend to what your papa has said to you.”

Presently, the Marquis of Hartlepool came up accompanied by Mrs. Radcliffe and Mr. Thornton. May was obliged to offer some apologies for quitting him so abruptly in the portrait-gallery, and though annoyed by the treatment he had experienced, he was easily appeased.

Resolved to bring the affair to an immediate issue, Lady Richborough suggested an extension of their promenade, and they strolled on in the direction of the yew-tree alley.

To prevent May’s escape Myrtilla took her arm, and very soon engaged the marquis in a lively discourse, which enabled him indirectly to renew his suit.

They were left to themselves, for Mrs. Radcliffe and grandpapa, who comprehended Myrtila's tactics, discreetly kept back.

Unquestionably there is something in a dim yew-tree alley favourable to utterances of love, but the presence of a third person is not calculated to heighten their effect. This marquis's protestations being intercepted by Myrtila, failed to move May, and though her silence might have been construed into assent, her looks betrayed her indifference. They had nearly reached the further end of the alley, when a tall dark figure suddenly appeared before them. Recognising the unwelcome intruder, Lady Richborough endeavoured to get rid of him.

"Pray go to the house, Mr. St. Ives," she cried. "I will join you almost immediately. I want to talk to you about the colonel's letter."

"Your ladyship must excuse me," he said. "After what has passed between Mr. Radcliffe and myself, I cannot re-enter the house."

"Have you seen her?" inquired May, in a low tone.

"No," he replied. "I merely returned to let you know that my search has been unsuccessful."

"I am so sorry I cannot aid you further," she rejoined. "But you must not go till I have had some explanation with papa."

"You are very kind. I cannot remain longer."

And he turned to depart, but was arrested by the Marquis of Hartlepool.

"Stop! stop, my dear fellow," cried the latter. "You shall not go without shaking hands with me. Not expecting to see you here, I did not recognise you at first. How are you, and how is my worthy friend, the colonel?"

"Do you know Mr. St. Ives?" exclaimed May, surprised.

"Know him! I ought to do. He is my preserver."

"Your preserver! What do you mean, marquis?"

"Yes, I repeat, my preserver. He saved my life last winter at Rome. I will tell you the story in two words."

"Not now, I beg," said Hilary.

"Yes, now," cried Myrtille.

"Thus it happened. One moonlight night, during a visit to the Coliseum, I was set upon by brigands, who had concealed themselves in the passages. My dastardly valet-de-place abandoned me, and I should certainly have been assassinated but for the gallant assistance rendered me by Mr. St. Ives. There were three of them—three athletic ruffians—and he had only a stout stick against their stilettoes. But he beat them off till the arrival of the sentinel."

"You greatly overrate the service, my dear marquis," said Hilary.

"Impossible to overrate it," replied the other. "You have laid me under an eternal obligation. But you have not answered my inquiries about the colonel. Where is he?"

"Still in Paris. I shall have good news for him."

when I go back. It will delight him to hear of the alliance you are about to form. Accept my congratulations."

"Would I were in a position to accept them," replied the marquis, glancing at May.

"I fear I have been indiscreet," observed Hilary to Lady Richborough.

"A little so, perhaps," she rejoined. "Your appearance was rather *mal à propos*. But the affair may be considered settled."

"I am glad to hear it," said Hilary. "Adieu, my dear marquis. I need not wish you success, for I know your cause is won."

And bowing around, he departed.

VIII.

How Hilary found the Person he sought.

HILARY did not leave the neighbourhood of Boxgrove. After a little debate with himself, he returned to the cottage, and asked the old dame whether she could accommodate him for the night. At first she hesitated, but at length said he might have the room which had been occupied by her late lodger, and took him to it. It was very simply furnished, but scrupulously clean. In one corner there was a chest, which immediately caught his eye, and he felt sure it belonged to Mrs. Sutton. On questioning the good dame as to the state of her larder, he found that it would be necessary to seek a meal elsewhere. Luckily, this was easy of accomplishment. Within half an hour's walk, there was a well-known inn, much resorted to by visitors from town on account of its picturesque situation, and at this comfortable hotel he knew from former experience he could get a good dinner. Accordingly, he set out thither.

Having dined very satisfactorily, he came forth, and was standing at the door of the inn, conversing with the landlord, when a well-appointed barouche came in sight. It was Mrs. Radcliffe's carriage, and with her were Lady Richborough and the Marquis of Hartlepool.

No sooner did the marquis descry Hilary than he stopped the carriage, and beckoning to him, said, in a low voice, as the young man came up,

"You may now really congratulate me. The thing positively is settled."

We are not sure that the announcement did not cause a sharp pang in the breast of the hearer, but he forced a smile, and declared he was delighted.

"I owe everything to Lady Richborough," pursued the marquis. "She has won me my bride."

"Expedited matters a little, that is all, my dear marquis," observed Myrtila. "The wooing might have been more tedious without me."

"And might not have ended as it has done," cried the marquis.

"Her ladyship has a vast deal more influence with May than I have, so I would not interfere," observed Mrs. Radcliffe.

"Well, I am quite willing to take all the credit you give me," said Myrtila, smiling. "Don't you think I have reason to feel proud of my success, Mr. St. Ives?"

"Indeed I do," he replied. "But I did not suppose the marquis required any advocacy."

"You are very much mistaken, my dear fellow," cried the other. "I almost began to despair, when Lady Richborough put in a word, and all difficulties vanished as if by magic."

"Her ladyship must be an enchantress—I have always thought so," remarked Hilary, gallantly.

"I am so sorry we can't take you on with us to Hazlemere," remarked Mrs. Radcliffe. "Nothing would have given me greater pleasure than to see you there, had circumstances permitted."

"Don't say another word, I entreat," rejoined the young man. "I am overjoyed by the intelligence I have just received, and hope, ere long, to have some good news to communicate to you in return. Mr. Radcliffe's prejudices against me will soon, I trust, be removed."

With this he bowed and retired, and the carriage went on.

In asserting that he was overjoyed, Hilary had belied his feelings. The intelligence had greatly disturbed him. He had not recovered when Mr. Malham drove up in his gig, and, alighting, greeted him cordially.

"What, are you come to look at us again, Mr. St. Ives?" said the surgeon. "We have had many changes since I saw you last, and more are likely to occur. We have lost your excellent nurse, Mrs. Sutton."

"So it seems. Can you tell me what has become of her?" asked Hilary.

"I wish I could. But I have no idea where she is gone. I never could understand why she left Hazlemere, but the house has not been like itself since. Mrs. Trapp, the present housekeeper, is not to be compared to her. Mrs. Sutton, as you may remember, had quite the air of a lady. It was her own fault, I'm persuaded, that she didn't marry well."

"Yes, I've heard so," remarked the landlord, who was standing by. "She was certainly a superior woman."

"Superior? Yes, I believe you. She was superior to any one in this neighbourhood. I'm afraid we shall never have her back."

"I'm by no means sure that she ain't back already," remarked the landlord.

"What do you mean, Crowder?" demanded the surgeon.

"Why, Frank Mowatt, one of the Boxgrove keepers, who was here just now, told me he saw her this very morning, soon after daylight, near the park, and other folks have seen her."

"Not likely, that," cried Mr. Malham, incredulously. "Mr. Radcliffe would have heard of her return, and so should I, if there were any truth in the report."

"Well, Mowatt declared he saw her, that's all I know," remarked Crowder.

"Send him to me," cried the surgeon. "I'll give him a guinea if he can satisfy me she has come back."

Nodding to Hilary, he then entered the house with the landlord.

Having already paid his reckoning, the young man walked away at a leisurely pace, meditating upon the information he had thus accidentally obtained.

The Fox and Hounds, where Hilary had dined, is situated at the foot of a hill which forms part of the same range as Boxgrove, being divided from the latter by a lovely valley, through which runs a celebrated

fishing-stream. The valley abounds in fine timber of various kinds, and on the banks of the river, and close to an old stone bridge that crosses it within a bow-shot of the inn, grows a row of tall Lombardy poplars.

Viewed from this bridge the scene, which comprehended the woody heights of Boxgrove and the ancient mansion that crowned them, was perfect. The noble park and the stately mansion had a strange fascination for Hilary. While sketching in the park, he had familiarised himself with the locality, and stamped its beauties so forcibly on his memory that they had ever afterwards haunted him. As he now gazed upon the enchanting prospect from the little bridge, the temptation to revisit these fair sylvan scenes was irresistible.

Descending from the bridge to the meadows, and following the course of the river for a few hundred yards, he struck into a footpath, which brought him to the outskirts of the park, and clearing the pales, he was presently in the midst of the thicket that clothed this side of the hill.

Familiar with the spot, he knew where to seek to strike towards the path that led to the uplands, and pushed on without the slightest misgiving. The thicket had charms of its own that might have delayed him had he not wished to reach the brow of the hill before the shades of evening, now rapidly coming on, should obscure the beauties of the view. It was an object with him, therefore, to gain the footpath as expeditiously as possible, but he failed in his design, for the

intricacies of the wood were more difficult than he imagined, and when at length he extricated himself it had become almost dark. Still he went on, and scaled the hill-side with rapid steps. The uplands were quickly reached, but the beauties of the view were shrouded in gloom. The ancient mansion was distinguishable, but only as a dark mass. He walked on in that direction, but though sorely tempted did not enter the garden. However, he remained for a short time in the vicinity of the house, as if spell-bound.

Lights gleamed from some of the windows. Was May there, or had she joined the party at Hazlemere?

Suddenly he heard footsteps, and perceived a female figure moving quickly along the terrace. His heart beat violently at the thought that it might be May. Without considering the consequences he hurried towards the garden-gate, and reached it at the very moment that it was opened by the person he had seen.

The person was Mrs. Sutton.

She knew him, and did not manifest the surprise that might have been expected at so strange a meeting.

She would not allow him to enter into any explanation, but bidding him follow her, speeded towards a clump of trees that crowned a knoll at some little distance from the garden-gate. On arriving there, she stopped, and thus addressed him:

"I know all—why you are in search of me—what passed between you and Miss Radcliffe this morning, and what subsequently occurred. I know where you

will lodge to-night, and concluding I should find you at Dame Perrins's cottage I was going thither to speak to you."

"Why give up your purpose? Let us go there at once," said Hilary.

"No," she replied. "I have little to say now, and I would rather say it here, beneath these trees, where the gloom shrouds my features, than in the cottage. The time is not yet arrived when we can talk freely together—when we can look each other in the face. You have to learn who and what I am—and till you have acquired that knowledge, a meeting like the present, where the darkness befriends me, is best for both of us."

"If you have a secret to reveal to me, this is a fitting opportunity for its disclosure," said Hilary.

"Not now," she rejoined. "Though I earnestly desire to tell you all, I shrink from the task. You must not—you cannot learn the secret from my lips. I should die in the effort to reveal it to you."

"Must I then remain in ignorance of a matter which is of vital importance to me to learn?" he asked.

"No," she rejoined. "Nothing shall be withheld from you. I have written down a statement, which would have been delivered to you after my death, but which you can now read. You will find it in the chest which you may have noticed in my little chamber in the cottage. Here is the key. When you have read the story of my life, you will know what to think of

me, and as you think of me, can act. We may meet again, or we may not. Do not be influenced by any feeling of pity for me. I do not want pity. I want love—yes, love! If you detest me, as you may do after you have learnt the truth, let us never meet again on earth. I will shun you, and you must shun me. But if you will feel that, in spite of all my errors, you can love me, come here to-morrow night at this hour."

"I will come," cried Hilary, earnestly.

"Make no rash promise," she rejoined. "You have not yet read my story. I am staying with May Radcliffe—but you must not come to the house. At nine to-morrow night you will find me beneath these trees. Farewell!"

And without waiting for any reply, she hurried back to the garden.

Greatly perplexed and agitated, Hilary made no attempt to follow her, but after a while took his way through the chesnut grove to the cottage.

When he was gone, two men, who had been lurking behind the trees during the interview, came from their hiding-place.

"Shall we knock him on the head as we did once afore, and get the key of the chest?" observed one of them.

"Tut! that would spoil all," cried his companion. "We don't want the papers. We can frighten Madam Sutton without 'em. We shall find her here to-morrow night. Let us go and reconnoitre the cottage."

And they moved off slowly in the direction that Hilary had taken.

Dame Perrins was in no very good humour. She had been long expecting her guest, and wondered he should stay out so long. It was not more than nine o'clock, but the old dame kept good hours. Her little tea equipage was on the table. The kettle was singing on the hob, and she set about preparing a cup of tea.

All at once she suspended her task, and looking at him mysteriously, and nodding her head, remarked:

"Mrs. Sutton has been here."

"I know it," replied Hilary. "I have just parted with her. She has given me the key of her chest."

"In that case, it be all right," observed the old dame. "She told me she wanted to see you to-night, and I thought she might come."

Having made her guest as comfortable as she could, and finding he had no further occasion for her services, the old dame locked and bolted the door, bade him good night, and retired to an inner room.

Left to himself, Hilary spent some little time in reflection. Though his curiosity was greatly excited, and though he could gratify it immediately, he hesitated, because he felt assured, from the terms in which Mrs. Sutton had spoken, that some painful revelation was about to be made to him.

At last he took a candle, and mounted to the little chamber. How quiet it looked, and the neat little bed

seemed to invite him to rest, but he had no thoughts of sleep. With a hand trembling with excitement, he unlocked the chest.

It contained several documents, bundles of old letters tied together, with other matters, but the first thing that caught his eye was a packet sealed with black wax.

Not doubting for a moment that this was intended for him, he took possession of it, and, descending to the little parlour, sat down and broke the seals.

The manuscript which then met his gaze was penned in a firm, bold, almost masculine hand, and showed no traces of the anxiety under which the writer must have laboured.

IX.

Mrs. Sutton's History.

As this sad story will not be perused by him for whom it is narrated until the unhappy writer is no more, she implores his pity and forgiveness. Willingly would she spare him these painful details, but he ought to know them, and she cannot depart in peace without lightening her breast by a full confession of her crimes.

Would I had died when I was quite young. How many years of bitter remorse should I have escaped. When I look back to that season of innocence and happiness, I can scarcely believe that so fair a child can have become the wretched, despairing woman who now pens these lines. Yet even in that child's breast there were seeds of evil, which, not being crushed, ripened into poisonous fruit. Excitable, wayward, capricious, not devoid of generosity, not unforgiving, but passionate—such was I as a young girl.

My mother died while I was almost an infant. She was very beautiful, and rendered my poor father extremely jealous, and I fear I must have inherited some of her qualities, for she was passionate in the extreme, and vindictive as passionate.

Personally, I believe, I resembled her—at least, when I was very young—though she was far more beautiful than I could ever pretend to be. But it was this resemblance that made my father so doatingly fond of me—so blind to my faults. Uncontrolled as a child, I became unmanageable as I grew towards womanhood, and my father perceived the sad consequences of his excessive indulgence to me when too late.

I was born in Jamaica—at Kingston. My mother was a native of the Island, but of English extraction; my father was of an ancient family, and brother of a baronet. He was a West India merchant, but did not prosper. He was indolent, and not a man of business—very hospitable, and very extravagant. He left me to the care of my nurse, Bonita, an Octaroon, who was devotedly attached to me, and supplied the place of a mother.

Nursed in luxury, I had scarcely a desire ungratified. My father studied every whim, and I was treated by those around me as if I had been a little princess. My education was neglected, but I was quick enough, and learnt many things that I ought not to have done. In short, I was very badly brought up, as could not fail to be the case under such circumstances.

In that warm climate young persons arrive early at maturity, and before I was sixteen, my charms—as they were—were sufficiently developed to many admirers, and I received several offers of

sons of rich merchants and planters, but to none of them. I could not foresee the should have married then.

h I did not know it at the time, my father difficulties. His large plantations and his very ace were mortgaged to a wealthy merchant, As ed Osborne. A widower, but without family, and was early as old as my own father, Mr. Osborne was ntly enamoured of me, and determined to make mot his wife. I detested him, and did not scruple to raction my dislike, but he did not mind that. He gave ver of father clearly to understand that my hand was to bid me the price of his forbearance towards him. But busi ough menaced by the seizure of all his property, and e left are that Osborne, if thwarted, was quite capable of wha y vindictive measures, my father would not sacrifice ne thus. He had written home, and had some hopes of obtaining from his brother the means of relieving himself from the frightful position in which he was placed. But in the interval Mr. Osborne became impatient, and declared he would not brook longer delay. In vain my father urged that he must first gain my affections. He treated the suggestion with contempt, and my poor father, driven to his wit's ends, was obliged to appeal to me.

Then for the first time I comprehended his position, and saw my own peril. But my detestation of Mr. Osborne was increased, and I declared I would rather die than wed him. With tears in his eyes, my father besought me to have some consideration for

him, but I remained inflexible. However, in order to gain time, I consented to permit Mr. Osborne's addresses, and gave him some slight show of encouragement. This was a hard task to one of my impetuous nature, but I fulfilled it with tolerable success, consoling myself with the thought of the scorn with which I would requite him anon.

At last the mail, so anxiously expected, arrived, but it did not bring the hoped-for assistance from my uncle. He could not, or would not, help my father—at least, to the extent required. But he sent out a young man, who had been a clerk in a mercantile house, to assist him in winding up his affairs.

John Bromley, the young clerk, was very shrewd and intelligent, and, moreover, very handsome. He pleased me better than any one whom I had seen in Jamaica. On being made acquainted with the exact state of my father's affairs, which was worse than he had been led to anticipate, Bromley evinced great alarm, and at once stated that the only chance was an arrangement with Mr. Osborne. My father then explained to him the condition exacted by his creditor, and that no other arrangement was possible. I was present at the time, and the young man glanced at me before making an observation. Reading my repugnance to the plan in my looks, he shaped his answer accordingly.

"It is quite clear you are in Mr. Osborne's power, sir," he said to my father; "but were I in your place, b1

I would let him do his worst, rather than yield my daughter to him."

"I cannot help it," was the reply, accompanied by a groan. "I must yield to circumstances."

"Before you take any decisive step, sir," said Bromley, "let me consider the matter, and see if I cannot discover some remedy."

My father shook his head, but as I appealed to him, he agreed to wait. As the young man quitted the room, he said in a low tone to me, "I will save you, if I can."

In the few days that followed I saw a good deal of young Bromley, and soon found that he had fallen desperately in love with me, nor did I disguise from him that he had excited a corresponding feeling in my breast. He implored me in the most passionate terms not to surrender myself to the hateful man, who would purchase me as he would a slave, but to resist my father's commands, and, if he remained obdurate, to fly. I half promised assent, but had no serious intention of complying.

Seeing no chance of escape, I consulted Bonita. After hearing all I had to say, she reflected, and then declared there was but one means of liberation, but I might not like to have recourse to it. I eagerly caught at the suggestion. Be it what it might, I would adopt it. With a look that frightened me, but did not shake my purpose, she then said that she would apply for a charm to an Obeah woman. I knew what that meant, but did not forbid her.

I have now arrived at a period of my history on which I cannot look back without horror and the deepest remorse. I can offer nothing in extenuation of my guilty conduct, but I am amazed at it.

Accompanied by Bonita, I paid a stealthy visit to the hut of the terrible woman who had promised me deliverance, and she told me that her most potent charms would be ineffectual against my persecutor. Only in one way could I free myself from him, and as she said this she held up in her yellow, skinny hand a small phial, adding that a few drops, mingled with wine, or any other drink, would do the business. I did not wait to question her further, but, giving her my purse, which she thrust into her pouch with a fiendish grin, hurried away with Bonita. I allowed myself no time for reflection. My blood seemed on fire, and fierce thoughts agitated my breast. My visit to the Obeah woman's hut seemed to have changed my nature. Had she dealings with evil spirits, as was asserted, and had one of them taken possession of me?

Mr. Osborne was at the residencia that night. He had dined with my father, and I left them sipping their claret in the verandah, while I paid my stolen visit to the Obeah woman. Bromley was with them. My absence had not been noticed, but he had been aware of it, for he knew my errand. He regarded me anxiously as I re-appeared, and I knew what his looks meant to convey. Little doubt indeed was left me on the subject, for Mr. Osborne rose from his seat, and,

with a triumphant look, told me that I should soon be his bride. He would have embraced me, but I thrust him back with loathing, and any lingering hesitation I might have felt was then removed. He was greatly enraged, and vented his displeasure on my father. I took advantage of this moment to whisper a few words to Bromley, who turned very pale, and, to hide his trepidation, walked to a little distance in the court. My father and Mr. Osborne had just lighted their cigars, when our black servant, Diego, brought in coffee and liqueurs, leaving me to serve them, as was my custom, and I went into the room for that purpose.

Now was my opportunity. Into the cup of coffee which I designed for Mr. Osborne, unperceived by any one, save Bromley, who was watching my movements from the court, I poured a few drops from the phial. I then handed the cup to Mr. Osborne, but he was still angry with me, and declined it. He was not destined to die thus. Fate had elected another victim. My father bade me give him the coffee. I would have retreated, but he snatched the cup from me.

Horror of horrors! he had swallowed the poisonous mixture ere I could prevent him.

I screamed and fainted. Bonita rushed into the room, and, amidst the utmost confusion, bore me off to my own chamber. They thought I had trodden on a snake. When I recovered, I sought for the phial, but it was gone. Bonita had removed it, or I would have ended my anguish at once. No discovery had as

yet been made. Mrs. Osborne had departed, stating that he should come betimes on the morrow with the marriage contract. My father had retired to rest, but I was resolved to see him, and make a full confession of my guilt, and, in spite of all Bonita's attempts to dissuade me, I repaired to his chamber. He was reclining on his couch, reading. I flung myself on my knees before him, and implored his forgiveness. At first he thought me distracted, but the truth soon forced itself upon him. Overcome for the moment, he fell back on the bed, and I was rushing out for assistance, but he detained me.

"I know the effect of this poison," he said, with a composure that astonished me. "There is no remedy; but the effect will not be immediate, and will give time to make arrangements for your safety, for on my death, which is inevitable, suspicions are certain to attach to you."

I told him I would not survive him, but he stopped me.

"Do not add another crime to that which you have unintentionally committed," he said. "My sole consolation will be that you will escape. I have prayed for death, but I did not wish it to come in this way. A packet sails for England to-morrow. You must sail by it."

"And leave you? Impossible!"

"You must go," he said, solemnly and sternly. "I must be obeyed now. Your presence would double the pangs of death. Seek not to move me with entreaties. I am inflexible. Bromley will take charge of

you. I intended to send him back by this packet, though with very different tidings. Bonita shall also go with you. Make your preparations to-night. You must be off before Mr. Osborne can learn anything of the plan."

Again I besought him to allow me to stay. Again he sternly refused.

"As you hope for my forgiveness you will obey me," he said. "You have the night before you. Employ it, so that you can go on board at daybreak. I shall not feel easy till you are gone. Then I can die in peace."

I wept—I prayed—I clung to him—I bedewed his hands with my tears—but I could not move him.

All was done as he enjoined. How he passed the night after I quitted him, I know not, but when I tapped at his door, an hour before daybreak, to tell him all was ready, he was fully attired. At that trying moment, when I felt ready to sink from the weight of anguish, he was perfectly composed. His countenance was serene in expression, though deathly pale, for he had already begun to feel the effects of the poisonous draught. But he bore himself so firmly and manfully, that I felt ashamed of my own weakness, and strove to imitate him, though I thought my heart would burst with the effort.

Never had I loved him so dearly as then. To say that I would have willingly died for him is simply to repeat the supplication I had addressed a hundred times that night to Heaven. His firmness never deserted him

till the parting moment came. He had pardoned me—had blessed me—had bade me an eternal farewell, and I was about to leave the room, when I saw him reel and fall back on the couch. I rushed towards him, but he motioned me away.

“Go! go!” he exclaimed. “It is nothing. It will pass. Farewell for ever!”

Many months afterwards, when I had reached England, I learnt that he was found lifeless by his bedside.

Before proceeding, I must state that Colonel Delacombe is even now, as far as I am aware, wholly unacquainted with the portion of my history which I have just related.

I suffered much during my passage to England, but more in mind than body, and never ceased to reproach myself with the crime I had committed. But for Bonita’s watchful care I believe I should have died. Bromley, also, strove to mitigate my distress. We were constantly together, and his passion for me increased. But mine had declined, for I began to fear him. He wished to marry me immediately on our arrival at Southampton, but to this proposition I would not listen, and he became angry and suspicious, declared that I was trifling with him, and hinted that I was in his power, and must comply. This menace changed any lingering feeling of regard into positive aversion. But

I avoided a quarrel, and resolved to get rid of him when we landed.

How I escaped from him at Southampton I need not relate, but I got to London with Bonita. Then I was safe. I had previously resolved not to make myself known to my uncle, and if he heard of my arrival in England, Bromley could not tell him where to find me. But I had no apprehensions on this score, and though Bromley made diligent search for me, it was not till long afterwards that he was successful.

For some months I lived in obscure lodgings in Kensington. Bonita passed as my mother.

Tired of this life, which appeared wretched indeed after the luxurious existence I had led in Jamaica, I should have presented myself to my uncle, had I dared to do so. But I thought the haughty baronet would cast me off, and Bonita was of the same opinion. However, I emerged from my seclusion, and one day when walking in the Park, accompanied by Bonita, I attracted the attention of a very handsome young officer. He made some excuse for addressing me, and though I received his advances very coldly he would not be dismissed. Having ascertained where I lived, he contrived to meet me again.

Other meetings followed, and Seymour Delacombe—for he it was—became desperately enamoured of me—so desperately, that he proposed marriage, though he supposed my condition far inferior to his own. Subsequently, when the violence of his passion had abated,

he reproached me with having duped him, but it is needless to say the accusation was false.

When Bonita, whom he believed to be my mother, told him in a decided tone that our intimacy must cease, he became half frantic, vowed that his intentions were honourable, and that he meant to wed me.

He kept his word—though not without hesitation and delay—and we were privately married.

Alas! the union was fraught with misery. No sooner was the step taken than he repented it. I had left London by his desire, and resided at a little cottage in the neighbourhood of Bath. Bonita was always with me. Ashamed of me, irritated with himself for having made—as he deemed—such a dreadful *mésalliance*, my husband visited his anger on me.

I bore his reproaches at first with patience, but my pride soon took fire, and painful scenes occurred between us. When he taunted me with my lowly origin, I could have retorted that my family was better than his own, but I forbore, as it would necessitate other explanations, and I would not allow Bonita to reply.

Our quarrels grew more frequent—more fierce. After the first few months he rarely came near me. My life was now a burthen. But I had a hope of brighter days. I expected to become a mother.

It was about this time, when I was driven into a state bordering upon frenzy, that my evil genius again appeared before me. By dint of constant inquiries Bromley had traced me out. He had learnt that I was married, and was aware of my present unhappiness.

He came under the pretence of offering me advice and assistance, and I was foolish enough to give him welcome. Bonita warned me of my danger, but I would not listen to her counsel.

Bromley took up his abode at Bath, in order to be near me, and spent almost every evening at the cottage. Utterly neglected by my husband, and having no other society, he helped me to pass the weary hours, but I did not foresee—as I ought to have done—how my conduct would be misconstrued.

Mischief-makers reported what was going on to Seymour.

One evening he arrived unexpectedly and found Bromley with me. Thrusting him indignantly from the house, he turned his fury upon me; heaping upon me every opprobrious epithet that his rage dictated. He charged me with having dishonoured him with a man who had been my paramour before marriage.

Stung beyond endurance by his galling words, and no longer mistress of myself, I snatched up a knife, and should have plunged it to his heart, but, thank Heaven! I was spared that crime. Bonita flung herself between us, and tried to obtain a hearing, but in vain. He was deaf to her entreaties.

After such a scene reconciliation was impossible; and I was not surprised to receive a letter from my husband, informing me that he was going to Ireland with his regiment, and would see me no more. At the same time he enclosed a sum of money, stating that the like amount would be paid me quarterly.

I wrote to tell him that he had wronged me by his suspicions, but he did not deign to answer my letter. Perhaps he had heard that I had been indiscreet enough to continue my intimacy with Bromley.

I will pass over several wretched months. I would fain blot them from my memory. My child was born, and I gave him my father's name of Alberic. I wrote to Seymour imploring forgiveness for his son's sake.

My letter, like the one I had formerly written, remained unanswered, but he sent a confidential agent to me—a certain Mr. Courtenay. This person's manner was kindly, and he displayed much feeling. He told me his instructions were to remove the child, and that if I refused to deliver it up to him no further allowance would be made me. He gave me a solemn assurance that the child would be well cared for, but added that I could not be allowed to see it. I rejected the proposition. But alas! I was weak and wicked enough to yield to Bromley's persuasions, and suffered my little Alberic to be taken from me.

The punishment of my heartless and unnatural conduct was not long delayed. Bonita was absent at the time, but when she returned she bitterly reproached me. From that moment she conceived a violent antipathy to Bromley, and sought to drive him from the house.

Such an existence, as I then led, embittered as it was by Bonita's ceaseless reproaches, was unsupportable. Bromley, who thought his life in danger, urged me to

fly with him, and the fatal influence he had now acquired over me, compelled me to assent.

Step by step I went downward.

Before my departure I wrote a few hurried lines to Bonita, bidding her farewell, and enclosing her a sum of money.

No fixed plans. No precise destination. Our journey soon came to an end.

We were crossing the Severn in the ferry-boat from the Old Passage to Chepstow. A gale was blowing at the time. The boat was upset, and all within her perished except myself. I escaped by miracle, but none knew that I had escaped.

My marvellous preservation from a watery grave suggested a plan to me, and I resolved to act upon it. Lost to the world—believed to be drowned, I would begin life anew, under a new name.

Perhaps I might have returned to poor Bonita. But my letter had killed her.

When she found that I had abandoned her, she had done with life. She had brought the phial of poison with her from Jamaica, and the moment was come to have recourse to it.

In the part I had resolved to enact, I ran no risk of detection. Few knew me in England, and the few who did were unacquainted with my real history. My uncle had never seen me. I had no fear of my hus-

band. He would not doubt that I had perished, when he read the account of the disaster in the Severn. To one of my temperament there was a strange satisfaction in having severed all ties. Freed from Bromley—divorced as if by death from a husband who hated me, I rejoiced at my deliverance. But, on the other hand, I had lost the truest and best friend I had on earth. I had also lost my child.

For good or ill, the step was taken. I could not, and would not, retreat.

I took the name of Sutton, and described myself as a widow.

How my pride revolted against the humble situation I was compelled in the first instance to accept. I, who had had a dozen servants to wait upon me, whose slightest look was obeyed—I, the niece of one of the proudest men in England—to become nurse to the children of a woman whom I felt to be my inferior in every respect! I could scarcely submit to the degradation. Yet I discharged my duties so well, that I kept the situation for nearly three years, and pleased my mistress so much, that she recommended me to Mrs. Radcliffe of Hazlemere, into whose service I next entered.

I was then two-and-twenty, but I looked five years older. Such beauty as I once possessed had fled. My manner likewise was changed. All my natural gaiety had forsaken me. From the first my new mistress took a great fancy to me, and was curious to learn my history. I told her I was a widow, and that my married

life had been unhappy, but I avoided entering into details, and she was considerate enough not to press me further.

Mrs. Radcliffe was in delicate health, threatened with consumption, and I nursed her with so much care, that I may venture to affirm that I saved her life. I had now become indispensable to her, was promoted to the post of housekeeper, and the entire management of the establishment devolved upon me. Weak, vain, indolent as she was, it was not difficult to gain an ascendancy over Mrs. Radcliffe.

My authority in the house became almost absolute, for Mr. Radcliffe, the best-hearted and kindest of men, but also one of the easiest, never interfered with me.

Having acted as nurse to May, I had won the affections of that charming child, and her attachment to me helped in some measure to fill up the terrible void in my heart.

Thus my position was completely assured, and I might have been happy, if I could but have obliterated the past. But the undying worm gnawed incessantly at my heart. Though hidden from the world, I could not fly from myself. My rest was broken by dreadful dreams. I saw my father with a stern reproachful look—Bonita—Bromley—but strange to say! for a time I thought not of Seymour or of my little Alberic.

Though Mrs. Radcliffe's weak and frivolous character always inspired me with contempt, I entertained a certain regard for her, till one day she confidentially informed me that she nourished a secret affection for

one who ought to have been her husband, and she showed me some of his letters.

Judge my surprise—judge my consternation—when I found these letters were from Seymour Delacombe. A strange feeling of jealousy was aroused. Though I knew that when Seymour made love to Esther Thornton, he deemed himself released by death from his marriage ties, my jealousy of her, my anger against him, were not lessened by that consideration.

And these feelings were kept alive—nay, increased—because, having enlisted my sympathy, as she deemed, Mrs. Radcliffe constantly talked to me of her old lover. He had given her his miniature, which she now produced, and hung it above the chimney-piece in her boudoir. There it was constantly before me.

I did not alter my demeanour towards her—I contrived to maintain a semblance of respect—but I was often on the point of betraying myself by an explosion of jealous rage, and I resolved to have revenge for the torture she unconsciously inflicted upon me.

It would not be true to say that the feelings that I once entertained for Seymour were revived by this constant reference to him, but it brought him to my mind, and awakened my maternal affections, which had so long lain dormant. I could not rest till I had ascertained what had become of my little Alberic. From inquiries, which I caused to be made, I learnt that he was with Mr. Courtenay at Exeter, and satisfied that he was well cared for I was perforce content.

Time went on, and for many years nothing occurred to disturb my fancied security.

All apprehensions of detection had long since ceased, when one day I received a letter that filled me with alarm. It was from an elder brother of Bromley, whom I had never seen, but whom I had heard described as unprincipled and unscrupulous. Daniel Bromley knew my unhappy story, for John had been imprudent enough to reveal it to him.

At the time of the disastrous accident on the Severn, Daniel Bromley had just sailed for America, and I think it was John's intention to join him there. Hearing of his brother's death, Daniel went on to San Francisco, and lost all the money he gained in gambling and low dissipation.

After a prolonged absence, and many disreputable adventures, he returned to this country in a wretched plight.

From the newspaper report of the accident he had been led to believe that I had perished at the same time as his brother, but on making inquiries on the spot he discovered that the body had never been found, and his suspicions being aroused he made further investigations that eventually led to my discovery.

No sooner did the villain satisfy himself on this point, than he wrote the letter I have mentioned, and threatened to reveal all the details of my early life, with which he had become acquainted owing to John's indiscretion, my unhappy marriage, and every sub-

sequent incident of my career, unless he was paid handsomely for his silence.

I had no alternative but compliance, and his extortionate demands being incessant, I could no longer supply them.

Rendered desperate I defied him, and he then informed me that he should go to Mr. Courtenay, and deposit with him a sealed packet containing certain documents, to be despatched to India for Colonel Delacombe, if not reclaimed within three months. I disbelieved this menace, but it proved to be correct, for the packet eventually fell into my own hands.

It contained fearful evidences against me. I found within it all the letters I had written to the villain himself, together with a statement which he had drawn up, charging me with parricide. He endeavoured to substantiate the horrible accusation by letters from his brother John, and extracts from old Jamaica newspapers, in which mention was made of the suspicious circumstances under which my father died, as well as of my sudden disappearance.

The false villain likewise accused me of poisoning Bonita.

Death at last liberated me from the relentless extortioner, and I was allowed some years of comparative tranquillity. With such a heavy load of guilt on my soul, I could not have a tranquil mind, but I was no longer in constant dread of detection and disgrace.

Let me now turn to May Radcliffe.

Sweeter creature never breathed. Loving her as I did with infinitely more affection than her own mother, I became jealous of her as she threatened to deprive me of my power. I despised myself for the unworthy feeling, but I indulged it nevertheless. A perpetual conflict was going on in my breast between love for the dear girl, and dread of the sway she was sure to gain over her father, and which might be exercised to my disadvantage.

My secret aim was to get her early married, and I therefore encouraged an attachment that appeared to be springing up between her and her cousin Oswald. But I was foiled, for though Oswald was passionately enamoured of her, she was quite indifferent to him.

I was deliberately pursuing this plan, when an event occurred that turned my thoughts into an entirely different channel.

One night a young man, who had been attacked by robbers, was brought to Hazlemere. He was almost insensible from the injuries he had received, and was committed to my care by Mr. Radcliffe. While I was watching over him that night, he became light-headed, and amid his ravings frequently repeated the name of Courtenay. Already I had been struck by his remarkable resemblance to Seymour Delacombe, and the mention of this name confirmed my suspicions. A mark on the young man's shoulder convinced me that he was my son.

Yes, he was indeed my son—my Alberic—whom I had not beheld since he was an infant.

Oh! with what rapture I gazed upon his features. The flood-gates of my heart were burst open, and the long, long repressed tide rushed in.

My transports of delight were soon succeeded by emotions of terror. I had found my son—my dearest treasure on earth—but I should lose him again as soon as found. I dared not tell him I was his mother. He would spurn me from him if he knew all. Oh! the agony of that thought. A thousand extravagant notions passed through my brain. Nothing I would not attempt to keep my Alberic near me. Mrs. Radcliffe might be induced to aid my plan. She still loved Seymour, and would befriend Seymour's son. But this was the mere beginning of my wild scheme of which the consummation was to be Alberic's marriage with May. This scheme presented itself so vividly to my imagination, and seemed so feasible, that I resolved to act upon it. Nor was it so mad as it would appear. Mrs. Radcliffe was a mere puppet in my hands. I could move her as I pleased. May's heart was disengaged, and I thought her susceptibilities could be excited in favour of the handsome youth.

Success in the first instance attended my design. Mrs. Radcliffe, as I anticipated, took the liveliest interest in the young man, when convinced that he was the son of her old lover, and a strong and lasting impression was produced on May by Alberic's good looks and romantic character.

But all my combinations were destroyed by the unexpected return of him I most dreaded on earth. Fate, that had brought Alberic to Hazlemere, brought his father there likewise. Flight alone seemed left me, but I would not fly. The conflict was unequal, but I did not shrink from it. I knew that Colonel Delacombe feared me more than I feared him.

X.

The Portrait.

THAT night, about eleven o'clock, May was in her dressing-room. Seated beside her was a woman, more than double her own age, whose pale features bore traces of affliction. All at once their discourse was interrupted by a tap at the door. May's companion started up, and made a quick exit by a side-door communicating with the adjoining bedchamber.

Scarcely had she disappeared than Lady Richborough entered by the other door, bearing a taper.

May expressed great surprise at beholding her.

"I thought you meant to pass the night at Hazlemere," she observed.

"I have come back purposely to have a talk with you, dear," replied the other, putting down the candle, and seating herself. "I hope you don't feel very sleepy, for I have a great deal to say."

"I don't feel at all sleepy," replied May. "I almost fancy you have come to tell me that the marquis has thought better of it, and desires to be released from his engagement."

"No such thing. You have made him the happiest of men, and depend upon it, he will hold you to your promise. You will see him here to-morrow. However, it is not of the marquis that I desire to speak,

but of Colonel Delacombe. I am ashamed to say that I read his letter very hurriedly this morning, and the most important part of it escaped me. What he mentions is so curious that I could not rest till I had imparted it to you, so I returned to-night with Mrs. Woodcot."

"You excite my curiosity very much," cried May. "What can the colonel have told you?"

"Have a moment's patience. I must first make you acquainted with a strange tragical event connected with my own family, or you will not understand the motive of the colonel's inquiries. My father, Sir Umfraville Ilminster, had a younger brother, who became a West India merchant, and settled in Jamaica. My uncle Alberic married a Jamaica lady, by whom he had one child—a daughter—named Barbara. My aunt died about two or three years after her marriage. I never saw my uncle, but I believe he was very amiable, though unfitted for business. There was not a good understanding between him and my father, and they had ceased to correspond for some years, when Sir Umfraville received a very urgent letter from his brother, who it appeared had got into difficulties. Without immediate assistance, my uncle declared he should be ruined, and his daughter sacrificed to a man she detested. My father, I am sorry to say, was insensible to this appeal, and contented himself with sending out a clerk to Jamaica to assist in winding up his brother's affairs.

"The events I am relating occurred about four-

and-twenty years ago. My cousin, Barbara Ilminster, was then very young, but to judge from her portrait, which was sent to my father, she must have been extremely beautiful. My uncle's chief creditor, Mr. Osborne, a planter, demanded her hand, and as he could not be refused—though Barbara hated him—the marriage was arranged. But just as it was about to take place; my uncle died suddenly. Whether he sought deliverance from his troubles by suicide, or was poisoned, has never been ascertained.

"A terrible accusation was brought against my cousin Barbara. It was hinted that she administered the poison. But I do not believe the monstrous tale. If she had poisoned Mr. Osborne, who would have forced her to become his bride, I could understand it—but her father, who doted upon her—no! I cannot credit the accusation.

"Some colour, however, was given to the charge, because she left Jamaica, quite suddenly, in a packet that sailed a few hours before my uncle's death. But against this it was urged that her father had enjoined her abrupt departure in order to get her out of Mr. Osborne's way. Another circumstance has yet to be mentioned which raises grave doubts. She was accompanied in the voyage by her nurse, and Mr. Bromley, the young clerk, whom my father had sent out to Jamaica. On landing at Southampton, Barbara and her nurse unaccountably disappeared, and have never been heard of since."

"A terrible and mysterious story indeed," observed

May, who had listened with great interest to the narration. "It seems strange that I never heard it before."

"Sir Charles and I agreed not to mention it to you. It is one of those family histories that are best buried in oblivion, as it reflects little credit on our family. Sir Umfraville never spoke of his brother or his niece. Perhaps he reproached himself with his conduct. Had he sent the money to Uncle Alberic—as he might have done—as he *ought* to have done—this dire calamity—perhaps other calamities—might have been averted. Heaven only knows!"

"Though circumstances are against her, I do not believe in Barbara's guilt," observed May. "What became of her portrait, which you say your uncle Alberic sent to your father?"

"I have not seen it for years," replied Myrtila. "But I think I can find it. Let me consider. Yes. It was put out of the way by Sir Umfraville, but I know he concealed it in a secret drawer of the old cabinet in your room. I dare say it is there still. Let us see."

"Some other time," said May, with evident uneasiness. "Not now."

But Myrtila would not be stayed. "I want to look at it myself," she cried.

And snatching up the taper, she passed through the side door into the bedchamber.

As she entered, the person who had preceded her

hastily concealed herself behind the hangings of the bed.

May followed, and became reassured as she glanced around. It was a large, gloomy-looking chamber, panelled with black oak, partially hung with faded arras, and furnished with a large canopied bed, having tall, twisted posts, and tarnished brocade hangings. Against the wall, flanked by a couple of high-backed chairs, stood the antique cabinet. The taper scarcely illuminated the sombre room.

Giving the light to her companion, Myrtilla unlocked the cabinet, and touching a spring at the back, a secret drawer flew open.

As she anticipated, the portrait was there. The features, depicted by an artist of no mean skill, were those of a young girl of great beauty—the eyes large, dark, and full of fire, the complexion clear though pale, the hair dark and silky. There was an undefinable expression in the countenance.

Myrtilla gazed at the miniature for a few moments, and then, handing it to May, said, with a singular look:

“Have you ever seen that face before?”

“Seen it! How should I? Ha!” she exclaimed, as she regarded it more narrowly. “Is this your cousin Barbara Iminster?”

“Yes.”

“Why, I trace a likeness—a strong likeness to Mrs. Sutton.”

“Barbara Iminster and Mrs. Sutton are the same

person," replied Lady Richborough. "That is what Colonel Delacombe's letter informed me. That is what I came to tell you."

May's exclamations of astonishment were interrupted by the sudden appearance of the woman who was concealed behind the hangings of the bed.

"Yes," cried this person to Myrtila, who was petrified with astonishment. "There is no longer any necessity for concealment. In me you behold your cousin Barbara—the wife of Seymour Delacombe, and the mother of his son Alberic, whom you have hitherto known as Hilary St. Ives. You wonder to see me here, in your father's house, which I could never have entered during his life-time," continued the unhappy woman, still addressing Lady Richborough; "and never at any time under my own name. But I am here almost against my will. I have striven to fly, but a power, that I could not resist, has detained me. An asylum has been offered me by May, and I could not refuse it. I shall not need it long."

There was a brief pause, which was broken by Myrtila.

"Whatever errors you have committed," she said, in a sympathising voice, "I am sure you have atoned for them."

"Heaven only knows how much I have suffered," rejoined Barbara. "But my troubles are coming to an end. I have had enough time for repentance—and I *have* repented."

"I fear you have still some burden on your soul

which would be relieved by confession," said Myrtille. "Open your heart to us, and rest assured of our sympathy. We will offer you every consolation in our power."

"I have written down the particulars of my sad history for my son. He will recount them to you when I am gone."

"You seem to have a presentiment of some impending calamity," observed Myrtille.

"I have," replied Barbara. "In all that has occurred lately I discern the hand of fate, and the final event cannot be far off. I have struggled against my destiny. My desire is to find a retreat where I can hide my sorrows, and die unknown."

"You have found a refuge here, and you must live for your son," said May.

"If he bids me live, I *will* live," cried the unhappy woman. "I have appointed to meet him to-morrow night, but before then he will have learnt my history, and may not come. In that case nothing will be left me but despair."

"Do not alarm yourself thus needlessly," said May. "Be sure he will keep the appointment. But open your heart to us. You need fear no severe judgment, and you will feel easier for the confession."

Barbara yielded. They repaired to the dressing-room, where each having taken a seat, she commenced her relation, to which her hearers listened with the deepest attention. They made no remark, though

now and then they could not help exchanging a glance.

"I know you must condemn me," said Barbara, as she brought her story to a close, "and you will condemn me justly, for my conduct is utterly indefensible, but I may perhaps be shown mercy hereafter, on account of my sincere contrition, and the agonies of remorse I have endured.

"You now know what a wretched, guilty thing I am, but you do *not* know, and never can know, what I have suffered, because I cannot, dare not, attempt to describe to you my sleepless nights, when my pillow has seemed stuffed with thorns, and when I have been driven to the verge of madness by despair. No stings so sharp as those of a bad conscience. I have not exaggerated my sufferings to excite your commiseration. I want words to describe my mental anguish. I shall find no peace—no rest—except in the grave. Perhaps not there."

"Be comforted," cried May. "After so much gloom brighter days must be at hand. You have a son to love."

"If I felt sure of his love, I should wish for life," rejoined Barbara. "But I believe I am doomed."

"Doomed!" exclaimed both her hearers.

"Yes. I need not remind you that there is a superstition connected with this house. Poor Sir Charles Ilminster was warned of his approaching death. I, too, have had a warning."

The solemnity of her manner made both her hearers shudder.

"On returning to-night from the meeting with my son in the park, I passed through the library, the window of which had been left open, and hurried up the great staircase without interruption of any kind.

I had gained the portrait-gallery, and was hastening along it, when a dark figure seemed to detach itself from the wall, and bar my way. Fear nailed me to the spot. A pale phosphoric glimmer showed me the features of my father, but white as those of a corpse—and the look he fixed upon me was inexpressibly mournful. My tongue clove to my palate, or I would have spoken. As I still gazed at the apparition in speechless terror, the ghostly glimmer died away, and the figure melted into the darkness. How I gained my room I know not."

Amid the profound silence that ensued, the pendule on the mantel-piece struck twelve. Warned by the strokes, Barbara rose to retire, and Lady Richborough arose at the same time.

"Think over what I have told you, my dear," observed Barbara, as she bade good night to May; "and if you deem it best that I should not remain longer here, I will depart to-morrow."

"Oh, no! you must not go!" cried May. "Decide on nothing till you have seen your son."

"Well, I will trespass on your kindness till then. Good night!"

She had nearly reached her own room, which was

at the further end of the corridor, when she heard quick footsteps behind, and seeing Lady Richborough hastening towards her, she immediately stopped.

"It is very late, but I must keep you up a little longer," said Myrtila. "I have something to say to you that I could not mention before May."

"Come with me, then," rejoined Barbara. "I shall not sleep, so it matters not when I seek my couch."

XI.

A Vision.

THE chamber assigned to Barbara was not so large as May's, but similarly furnished.

On their entrance, the room looked so dark, owing to the black oak panels and the dusky hangings of the bed, that Barbara lighted a couple of wax candles on the dressing-table.

Since she had resumed her own name, a noticeable change had taken place in this remarkable woman's demeanour. Her manner was prouder than it had been as Mrs. Sutton. Seeing Lady Richborough gaze at her steadfastly, she drew herself up haughtily.

"I now recognise my cousin Barbara," said Myrtilla; "and the wonder is that I did not recognise you before. I am sorry you have not had a better welcome to my father's house."

"I have had a better welcome than I deserve," rejoined Barbara. "Pray be seated. You want to talk to me. Put any questions you think proper. I will answer them truthfully. I have nothing to conceal. I cannot darken myself in your estimation."

"I have no questions to ask," rejoined Myrtilla. "I do not want to talk to you of the past, but of the future."

"The future!" exclaimed Barbara, gloomily. "I have nothing to do with the future."

"Yes—yes—you must have some plans. Let us discuss them."

"Where would be the use? Till I have seen Alberic I can have no plans."

"I see you do not give me credit for the deep interest I take in you, Barbara," rejoined Myrtila. "You may be sure I am making no idle professions, when I say that I will serve you, if I can, and you will let me."

"I thank you much, Myrtila, but I want nothing—except rest. But you may serve my son."

"It is too late to serve him in the way you mean. Had I known your secret, I might have acted otherwise. But May is now engaged to the Marquis of Hartlepool."

"I am very sorry for it, and you will one day regret that you have been instrumental in bringing about that union. She will not be happy with the marquis."

"Why not? He is devoted to her."

"Maybe; but she cannot give him her heart. That is already bestowed upon my son. This is no idle assertion. She told me so herself."

"Had I known this before, the mischief might have been prevented. But it is now too late. The match cannot be broken off. The Radcliffes desire it, and are pledged to it."

"Better their pledges should be broken than May rendered miserable."

"None can know better than yourself that Mr. Rad-

cliffe's word is his bond. His promise will never be retracted."

"A promise made in error is not binding," said Barbara. "When Mr. Radcliffe is told of my marriage with Seymour Delacombe, and learns that the so-called Hilary St. Ives is our son, his objections will vanish, and he will rue his promise to the marquis."

"Still, he will consider himself bound by it, and most assuredly the marquis will never release May from the engagement."

"Not for my son's sake—not for mine, but for May's sake, I implore you to prevent the marriage. You *can* prevent it, if you will."

"Impossible. I am too far committed."

"You will not, you mean," cried Barbara, almost fiercely. "Mark what I say. If ill comes of the marriage—as it will—the sin will lie at your door."

"You cannot alarm me," rejoined Myrtilla, with affected indifference, though not without uneasiness. "But let us dismiss the subject, since it is utterly impossible I can interfere in the matter, even if disposed. Is there any chance of effecting a reconciliation between you and Colonel Delacombe?"

"None," replied Barbara, in a decided tone.

"I think otherwise. For his son's sake he might be content to overlook the past. A material change has taken place in his sentiments since he has ascertained that you belong to our family. Shall I read you what he says in his letter to me?"

"I do not care to hear it," rejoined Barbara,

coldly. "I have wronged him too deeply ever to hope for forgiveness. He may forgive me when I am gone—but not till then. With Alberic it is different. He may overlook my errors—may love me—may pour balm into my bruised heart. Heaven grant it! Heaven grant it! Oh! with what fear and trembling I look forward to our meeting. Surely he will not cast me off! Yet he may!—he may!" she added, with a look of inexpressible agony. "What will happen to me then?"

The spectacle of her anguish was unsupportable, and Myrtilla prepared to quit the room.

"Heaven be merciful to you, my unhappy cousin," she ejaculated, as she went forth.

Barbara did not notice her departure, so intense was her affliction; but at length, becoming aware that she was alone, she flung herself on her knees, and prayed long and fervently.

Somewhat comforted, she disrobed herself, and, being completely exhausted, soon sank into a heavy slumber.

A vision, for it seemed more vivid than a dream, arose before her, and she beheld, bathed in glorious sunshine, and surrounded by a sea blue as the deep blue sky, the lovely island where she first drew breath.

Once more she inhaled an atmosphere laden with the scents of tropical flowers and trees. Once more she felt the heat of the flaming sun, which, fierce as were its beams, seemed to exhilarate her. Once more she heard the ceaseless screams and chatter of the

parrots mingled with the screams and chatter of the negroes. Once more her eye ranged over plains studded with dazzlingly white habitations, long savannahs fringed with groves of cocoa-trees, and thickets of cactus, plantations of sugar-cane and coffee. Once more she gazed on those bays of unequalled beauty where she had often sailed, and those blue mountains which she had often longed to climb. The whole scene was before her, with its fervid atmosphere, its fierce sunshine, its tropical beauties, and its delights. She seemed to have grown young again—to have become once more an innocent child. Her sad heart beat with pleasurable emotions, and she echoed the light laugh of her nurse Bonita. Yes, her dear devoted Bonita was alive again, smiling upon her as of yore, and bringing her cates and fruits. Suddenly she heard a voice. It was her father's. He was calling for his dear little Barbara. She flew to meet him. He clasped her in his arms, and kissed her brow. But his lips seemed icy cold, and with a start she awoke.

Was she really awake, or still dreaming? Her father seemed to be bending over the couch, but the expression of his countenance was changed, and was now radiant. As she stretched out her arms the apparition vanished.

XII.

Father and Son.

ALBERIC DELACOMBE, as we shall henceforth style him, remained for several hours occupied with the history of his unhappy mother.

There was more of the confession than we have deemed it necessary to lay before the reader, but the latter portion was chiefly explanatory of the motives that had led her to quit Hazlemere. An insane desire to disappear from the world, of which she was utterly weary, had again beset her, and her precautions had been so well taken that she might perhaps never have been heard of more, if her strong maternal feelings had not overpowered her resolution and brought her back to Boxgrove.

Nothing astonished Alberic Delacombe more than to learn, as he did from the concluding lines of his mother's sad story, that she belonged to the Ilminster family.

Utterly unprepared for this revelation he could scarcely credit it, and any satisfaction he might have derived from the discovery was marred by reflections that could not fail to occur to his mind.

For more than an hour after he had finished the perusal of the painful story, he remained pondering

upon its details. Greatly shocked, greatly distressed, he still pitied his mother. Though unable to absolve her, he could not condemn her.

At last he sought his couch, but excitement banished slumber. Rising at an early hour from his sleepless pillow, he partook of a slight breakfast, and telling Dame Perrins that he should certainly return in the evening, set off for the nearest railway station, and proceeded to town. Restless, over-excited, and uneasy, he could not otherwise employ the interval of time.

On arriving at the Langham Hotel, where he was staying, a fresh surprise awaited him. His father had just arrived by the night mail from Paris, and Alberic immediately repaired to his room.

The colonel, who was still in bed, being a good deal fatigued by the journey, told him he had started contrary to the injunctions of his physician, but he felt so unaccountably anxious that he would not delay his departure.

"I was resolved to start, coûte qui coûte," he cried; "and I do not think I am the worse for the journey. But what news do you bring me? Have you seen Mrs. Sutton?"

The young man replied by placing in the colonel's hands the packet containing his mother's history.

"That will tell you all," he said. "When you have read it, summon me."

And he quitted the room.

More than an hour elapsed, and receiving no sum-

mons, Alberic became uneasy, and went up to his father's room.

He tapped at the door, but all remained silent within, and his uneasiness increasing, he entered the room, and found the colonel fully dressed and seated near a small writing-table.

Before him lay the manuscript which he had been reading. His hands were clasped against his brow, and he was so absorbed that he appeared quite unconscious of his son's presence, till Alberic touched him. He then uncovered his face, which was ghastly pale.

The colonel was greatly changed—shaken and enfeebled by illness. His splendid frame was emaciated. His hair was blanched, but his dark brows and moustaches contrasted forcibly with the almost cadaverous hue of his countenance, as did the large cicatrix with which his cheek was marked.

Alberic gazed at him anxiously, alarmed by the expression of his countenance, for it was easy to perceive that a terrible struggle was passing within.

The colonel made a vain effort to speak, but his accents were broken and unintelligible, and, rising from his chair, he flung his arms round his son's neck, and gave way to an access of emotion.

Very shortly, however, he recovered, and, as if ashamed of the display he had made, endeavoured to assume a cold expression. But his lips still quivered, and the voice was husky in which he bade Alberic be seated.

"You have read this confession," he said, laying his hand upon the papers, but keeping his searching eye on his son as he spoke. "What do you think of it?"

"Do not ask me to pass judgment on my mother, sir," rejoined Alberic.

"Well, if you evade my question," rejoined the colonel, sternly, "I will put another. What would you have me do?"

"I dare not ask you,—yet I would it were in your power to forgive her."

A flush dyed the colonel's pale cheek, and his eye blazed fiercely.

"Alberic," he cried, "I would do much for you—but not that."

"Father," rejoined Alberic, "have you read that confession attentively?"

"Most attentively."

"And does it not move you?"

"Deeply."

"Shall I describe its effect on me? Shall I say how much those cries, which evidently proceed from a broken heart, have touched me? A fatal mistake has led to frightful consequences. But there was a time when she was guiltless—guiltless, at least, towards you—and when all this misery might have been spared. I would bring you back to that time."

"Yes, I am not free from blame," said the colonel. "Had I known who she was I might have acted differently."

"The past is irreparable. But I would try to save you from further self-reproach. If my unhappy mother has not expiated her errors by a life of penitence, she has suffered much. By those sufferings—by your former love—I would intercede for her."

"Heaven, I hope, will forgive her," said the colonel. "But do not urge me further now," he added, with a movement of impatience. "Hereafter, I may feel differently."

"Your forgiveness must not be delayed, if it is to be of avail. I am sure she has not long to live!"

"Why do you think so?" demanded the colonel.

"The impression was produced upon me last night. I cannot divest myself of it."

"I do not think I shall live long myself," muttered his father.

"Then I would the more earnestly exhort you to forgive her—and without delay," urged his son. "Go with me to Boxgrove to-night. You will see her. Console her with a word—one word will suffice. You will make me happy, and she will die in peace. Listen to me, I implore you."

And he would have flung himself at his father's feet, but the colonel checked him.

"You have conquered, my son," he said. "I will do as you desire. I will go with you to-night. I felt I had something to do when I could not rest in Paris. I now discover what it is."

"Some good power inspired your return," cried his

son. "Had you delayed a few days, it might have been too late."

"True," ejaculated the colonel, solemnly.

He then locked up the packet in his travelling case. This done, he went down with his son to the coffee-room.

XIII.

Further Explanations.

THE colonel ordered breakfast, and Alberic, who had eaten nothing since he had left the cottage at an early hour, was well disposed to join him, and did far more justice to what was set before them than his father did.

They had just finished their repast, when who should come into the coffee-room, which happened to be empty at the time, but Mr. Thornton and Mr. Radcliffe. On seeing them the colonel immediately arose, and his son followed his example.

"God bless my soul, colonel, is that you?" exclaimed Mr. Thornton, hurrying towards him, and shaking him cordially by the hand. "Just returned from Paris, I suppose. Charmed to see you back. Can't say you're looking very well, though."

"I am very far from well, my dear friend," replied the colonel. "But I trust I shall soon come round."

He then addressed himself to Mr. Radcliffe, who returned his salutation with great stiffness and formality. After a few matter of course observations, the colonel drew Alberic forward, and said,

"I am glad of this opportunity of presenting my son to you, gentlemen. You have known him hereto-

fore as Hilary St. Ives. Pray know him now as Alberic Delacombe."

"I am very glad indeed to know Mr. Alberic Delacombe," said Mr. Thornton, shaking hands with the young man.

Mr. Radcliffe bowed very stiffly, and merely remarked,

"I have been told that you had adopted Mr. St. Ives, colonel, but I was not aware that you had accorded him your name."

"He bears the name to which he is lawfully entitled," replied the colonel, haughtily. "He is my son, sir."

"Born in wedlock?" observed Mr. Radcliffe, with a half sneer.

"Hear me, Mr. Radcliffe," said the colonel, "and let what I say remove all your doubts. He is my son by my marriage with the only daughter of Mr. Alberic Ilminster, of Jamaica."

"Is this the fact, colonel?" cried Mr. Radcliffe, astounded.

"The fact, sir! Do you doubt my word?"

"Heaven forbid! Only I am so much astonished."

"No wonder you are astonished," cried Mr. Thornton. "So am I. Why, Alberic Ilminster, of Jamaica, was the younger brother of Sir Umfraville Ilminster of Boxgrove, consequently your wife, colonel, must have been poor Sir Charles's first cousin."

"Perfectly correct, sir."

"I presume she died many years ago?"

"You are mistaken, sir. She is alive now."

"Zounds! you have contrived to keep her in the background in a very extraordinary manner," cried the old gentleman, winking at Mr. Radcliffe. "We never heard of her."

"Never till this moment," echoed the other.

"Again you are mistaken, sir. Both you and Mr. Radcliffe know her, and have seen her repeatedly."

"Pray explain the riddle," cried Mr. Thornton, with a puzzled look, which, however, changed to a cunning smile, as he exclaimed, "Aha! I have it!—Mrs. Sutton—eh?"

Colonel Delacombe nodded assent.

"Is Mrs. Sutton this young man's mother?" demanded Mr. Radcliffe, eagerly.

"My wife and Alberic's mother," rejoined the colonel.

The worthy gentleman looked inexpressibly relieved.

"Would I had known this before," he exclaimed.

"I always thought Mrs. Sutton a very superior woman," observed Mr. Thornton. "But I little dreamed who she was."

As the coffee-room began now to fill, they adjourned to a private room, where they could continue their conversation without interruption.

By this time an extraordinary change had become manifest in Mr. Radcliffe's demeanour towards Colonel Delacombe and his son, especially towards the latter.

He was now just as friendly with Alberic as he had previously been cold and reserved, and strove to make amends for the rudeness he had shown the young man. More than once he repeated, "Oh, that I had known this before!"

When the topic on which they had been engaged was dismissed, Mr. Thornton alluded to the engagement that had just been entered into between the Marquis of Hartlepool and May, and the colonel of course offered his congratulations to the old gentleman and Mr. Radcliffe.

"I know the Marquis very well," he said. "My son and I saw a good deal of him in Rome, and liked him. He is not very brilliant, but he is amiable, and—a marquis."

"Yes, yes, it is a splendid match," cried Mr. Thornton, rubbing his hands with delight. "We are all enchanted with it—eh?" he added to Mr. Radcliffe, who did not, however, respond very warmly to the appeal.

"It is a very important alliance, no doubt," he said; "but I think it has been entered into rather precipitately. May has scarcely had sufficient time for consideration."

"Why, what's this? You insisted upon an immediate decision, and I think you were perfectly right," cried Mr. Thornton. "Don't you agree with me, colonel?"

"With most girls there would be none, that I own," rejoined the colonel. "But Miss Radcliffe is not an

ordinary girl. I did not think she was likely to be dazzled by rank and splendour."

"Nor is she," replied Mr. Radcliffe. "I won't say she sacrificed her own feelings, but she consented to oblige us all—that's the fact."

The colonel slightly shrugged his shoulders, but made no remark.

"She cannot fail to be happy, for the marquis will let her have her own way in everything," observed Mr. Thornton. "We mean to have the marriage celebrated with as little delay as possible, and, in fact, it is on business connected with it that we have come up to town to-day."

To Alberic the subject under discussion was exquisitely painful, and dreading lest he should betray his feelings, he got up, and moved to a window. He appeared to be watching the carriages in Portland-place, but he scarcely noticed them, when Mr. Radcliffe came up to him, and, patting him in a friendly manner on the back, said, in a low voice:

"Ah! if I had only known as much yesterday as I do now, a very different arrangement might have been made—not so splendid, but more satisfactory to me."

"I could not enter into any explanation then, Mr. Radcliffe, even if you would have allowed me," rejoined Alberic. "And now it is too late."

Here a slight cough from the colonel recalled Mr. Radcliffe.

"I must claim your attention for a few minutes more, sir," remarked the colonel. "You are acquainted

with the painful and peculiar circumstances connected with my marriage. You are acquainted with my wife's sad story. You have known her intimately for many years, and can judge of her conduct during that term."

"Her conduct, ever since I have known her, has been irreproachable," said Mr. Radcliffe, emphatically.

"Take my testimony to the same effect, colonel," cried Mr. Thornton.

"For my son's sake," pursued the colonel, "I have resolved to forget the past. And though others may censure me, I do not think you will blame my determination."

"On the contrary, I applaud it," cried Mr. Radcliffe. "And I can assure you it will sincerely gratify me to convey the joyful intelligence to your wife."

"I thank you, sir," said the colonel. "But she must receive her forgiveness from no other lips than mine."

"Then return with me to Boxgrove to-night, colonel," cried Mr. Thornton. "See her without delay."

"It was my intention to run down for that purpose with my son," replied the colonel. "I gladly accept your invitation. You shall precede us," he added to Alberic. "Meet your mother as appointed, and tell her all that has occurred. That will obviate the necessity of further explanation, and when I see her, it will be with less painful emotion either on her part or mine."

In pursuance of the arrangement, Alberic set off for Boxgrove Park by himself, leaving the colonel to the care of his friends.

The three gentlemen dined at the Langham, and did not take their departure till late in the evening.

XIV.

The Thunderstorm.

ALBERIC had returned to the cottage.

He was all impatience to see his mother, and convey to her the joyful intelligence of which he was the bearer. The minutes seemed to pass slowly, but at last the appointed hour drew near, and he was preparing to set out for the place of rendezvous in the park when a violent thunderstorm came on, accompanied by a deluge of rain.

He waited, therefore, for a few minutes, expecting that the fury of the storm would abate, but as no improvement took place, he started, in spite of all Dame Perrins's attempts to dissuade him. The good old dame thought he must be mad to venture forth on such a night. The rain was coming down in torrents at the time, and the blue forked flashes nearly blinded him, but he dashed across the road, and was soon in the thick of the chesnut-grove.

Here an appalling incident occurred. A loud peal of thunder rattled overhead like a discharge of artillery. A bolt fell, and a large tree was struck within fifty yards of him—one of its huge arms shivered, and the bark stripped from the side of the trunk.

Stunned by the dreadful concussion, he was unable

to move for a few moments, and when his powers returned, he almost thought of turning back, as it was not likely his mother would brave such a storm—but he went on.

Not without great difficulty, and frequent interruption, did he get out of the grove, and then not at the point he expected. But for the incessant blaze of lightning the night would have been pitch-dark. However, he descried the clump of trees, and strode on in that direction as rapidly as the slippery turf would allow him.

Still, the thunder rolled awfully, the lightning flashed, and the hissing rain descended in torrents.

Suddenly, he underwent a new alarm. Amid the silence that followed a loud crash, he heard a piercing scream, and felt convinced that it proceeded from his mother.

Was she in danger, or merely alarmed by the thunder? Another scream followed, though scarcely distinguishable amid the din of the storm.

Full of terror, he hurried on, and was nearing the group of trees when two ruffianly-looking men burst forth. The foremost was armed with a heavy bludgeon, but the other grasped a weapon, which, seen by the lightning, looked like a long, sharp-pointed knife, and seemed dripping with blood.

The countenances of the miscreants almost proclaimed the murderous deed on which they had been engaged. Alberic recognised them at once as the two villains who had robbed and maltreated him on Wootton

Heath; and coupling their presence on the spot with the screams he had just heard, fearful apprehensions were roused.

Perhaps they had assassinated his mother.

Maddened by the thought, with a fierce cry he rushed upon them, regardless of any consequences to himself. He was wholly unarmed, but rage supplied him with superhuman strength, and made him a match for his antagonists, though both were athletic men. Closing with the foremost ruffian, and catching him by the throat before he could strike a blow with the bludgeon, he hurled him backwards against his comrade.

In falling the wretch was seriously hurt by a stroke of the knife intended for the young man, who was thus released from one of his assailants. The next moment he was in possession of the bludgeon, and a smashing blow with it caused the other ruffian to drop his knife.

Both villains then fled, but the one who was wounded had not gone more than a hundred yards when he fell to the ground exhausted by loss of blood. There he lay, vowing, with horrible oaths, that he would hang the comrade who had abandoned him.

Alberic, however, thought no more of either of them. A half-stifled cry directed him to the spot where his unfortunate mother was lying, and he instantly flew towards her. The lightning gave a livid hue like that of death to her pallid features, her eyes were

closed, and but that she still breathed, or rather gasped for breath, he might have thought that life was extinct.

But the life-blood was flowing fast from a deep wound in her side, and he strove in vain to stanch the crimson stream.

XV.

A Retrospect.

How the unhappy Barbara came by her fate must now be related.

The last day she was ever destined to see was spent in perfect seclusion. May and Myrtille passed several hours with her, but could not induce her to converse with them. Her thoughts were elsewhere. She was told that Mr. Malham was in the house, and wished to see her, but she declined. She also refused to see Mrs. Radcliffe, alleging that she was not equal to an interview with any one.

"Beg your mother to excuse me," she said to May. "If all is well I will see her to-morrow. Pray let me be undisturbed to-day."

It was evident that she had not been able to conquer her antipathy to her former mistress. But her manner towards May was most tender and affectionate, and when they were alone together she expressed a truly maternal solicitude for her happiness.

"I wish I could persuade myself that the engagement you have entered into will make you happy," she said. "But I know you can never give the marquis your heart. On no account, however, break off the engagement, unless your father permits you to do so. Tell him all, and be guided by his counsel. The sole

desire of my life would have been gratified if you could have been united to Alberic, but fate seems against it, and we must bow to its decrees. Whatever betide, may you be happy!"

"The marquis has been here all day," said May; "and he must be blind indeed if he does not perceive that I dislike him."

Barbara regarded her compassionately.

"You have been persuaded to take a foolish step, my dear child," she said. "But your father will never allow you to be sacrificed if you tell him the truth. Hide nothing from him."

"He is gone to London with grandpapa, or I would have spoken to him to-day. I will never wed the marquis."

After this the unhappy woman begged to be left entirely to herself for a few hours.

How she passed the time was not known, but when May entered the room she found her on her knees, and her eyes were red with weeping. However, she was perfectly calm, and almost cheerful, and continued so until evening. But as the hour approached when she was to meet her son, she became nervously excited.

As there were indications of the terrible storm we have described, her companions endeavoured to dissuade her from going forth, but she would not be turned from her purpose.

May and Myrtille went with her to the library. They took no lights, and as they hastily traversed the

gallery, a dazzlingly vivid flash momentarily illumined the long line of portraits, while a clap of thunder shook the mansion.

"I must meet Alberic," she cried. "I must learn my fate."

Fearful of being detained, she resolved to set out at once.

"Do not go, I beseech you," cried May, greatly terrified. "Stop till the storm has passed."

But Barbara hurried on.

They had descended the great staircase, and reached the library without being perceived. Barbara paused for a moment only to strain May to her bosom, and whisper a word in her ear.

Just as the window was opened another vivid flash of lightning drove them back, and almost blinded them.

When the others regained their sight Barbara was gone. But they beheld her upon the terrace, speeding to her destination, unappalled by the terrors of the storm.

"Heaven preserve her!" ejaculated May, fervently.

Heaven's support was needed by the unhappy woman. Her hour had well-nigh come.

She had gained the park, and though the storm had increased in violence, though the rain beat against her brow, and the lightning played around her, she went on.

"I shall find my son there," she exclaimed. "He will not fail me."

She did not find him. But she found others whom she did not expect.

As she entered the woody ring, two savage-looking men who had watched her approach, as shown by the lightning, burst upon her. One of them seized her roughly by the arm to prevent her flight, and, brandishing a knife, threatened her with instant death if she uttered a cry.

"We knew you would come, in spite of the storm," cried the ruffian, in a jeering tone.

The unfortunate woman glanced around, vainly hoping that her son would appear.

"Ay, you may look round, madam," cried her captor. "You'll see nothin' on him to-night."

"You lie, villain!" she exclaimed. "My son will rescue me."

"Don't be too sure of that, madam. What money have you got about you?"

"None. I have neither money nor valuables. Release me at once, ruffian."

Both men laughed derisively.

"We ain't a-goin' to part with you like that, madam," said the other robber. "You ought to have known better than to come out on an errand like this, without purse, or pocket-book, or rings. But since you've been so careless, you must come along wi' us, and I'd recommend you to come quietly."

"I will not stir from this spot," she cried, resolutely.

They seized her and attempted to drag her off, but she caught hold of the branch of a tree, and screamed loudly for help.

"Hold your tongue!" cried one of the men with a terrible imprecation, "or I'll make you keep silence."

But she struggled to get free, and continued her outcries, hoping they would reach the ears of her son. But for the rattling of the thunder he would have heard them.

The struggle continued for a minute longer. Then giving utterance to a sharper cry, she fell back into the arms of one of her assailants.

"Why, thou'st killed her, Seth Cooper!" cried this ruffian, aghast at the dreadful deed.

"She forced me to do it, curse her!" cried Seth.

They were debating what should be done, when, to their great alarm, they became aware of Alberic's approach, and laying down the body of their still breathing victim, they rushed to meet him. The result has been already narrated.

XVI.

How Barbara was brought back to Boxgrove.

ALBERIC raised the dying woman tenderly, and subduing the emotion that threatened to overpower him, said,

"Do you not know me, mother? It is your son."

The words seemed to recal her to life.

With a cry of delight she flung her arms round his neck, and kissed him repeatedly.

But the effort was too great. Her hold relaxed. Her head dropped, and a shiver passed through her frame, prelusive of death.

"Speak to me, dear mother! speak to me!" cried Alberic, greatly alarmed.

"You have read my history. You know all?" she rejoined faintly.

"All."

"And you forgive me?" she asked, with trembling eagerness.

"Dearest mother, I have nothing to forgive. But I bring you my father's forgiveness."

"Is he here?" she cried. "Bring him to me."

"Alas, I cannot!" rejoined her son. "He is on his way to you."

"But he will not arrive in time. I knew we should

never meet again on earth. Bid him farewell for me, and say——”

Here her voice became inaudible.

Alberic placed his ear close to her lips, but could not catch the words. Her eyes, however, were fixed upon him, and did not quit him till they grew dim.

Another shudder, and all was over.

He gave way to no unavailing transports of grief, but continued to hold her in his arms and gaze at her rigid features, which, seen by the lightning, sometimes looked as if life had returned to them.

From this state he was roused by shouts proceeding from some men who had descried him from another part of the park, and were hurrying towards him.

Laying down the body, he answered their shouts, and the men soon afterwards coming up proved to be Frank Mowatt, the head gamekeeper, and two of his subordinates. All three had guns, and were attended by a couple of large hounds, and the latter began to growl as they approached the scene of the murder.

“Why, what’s this?” cried Mowatt, horrified by the spectacle that met his gaze. “Who has done the foul deed? Thou?” he added, levelling his gun at Alberic.

“Keep your shot for the right man,” rejoined the other, sternly. “One of the assassins is not far off, and the other must be in the park, and may be captured if you don’t waste time.”

His manner caused the keeper to lower his gun, while instant proof of the truth of the assertion was afforded by the hounds, who, having discovered the fallen wretch, were threatening to worry him, and had already given him a taste of their sharp fangs. The two underkeepers hurried to the spot, called off the dogs, and secured the terrified caitiff.

"Leave this villain to our charge," cried Alberic, who came up the next moment with Mowatt, "and go in search of his accomplice. You cannot fail to track him with these hounds."

"Ay, they're on his trail already," rejoined one of the keepers. "Must we go, Master Mowatt?"

"Ay, to be sure, Paul, and bring him back dead or alive," rejoined the head-keeper. "I'll take care of this chap, and shoot him if he gives any trouble."

"Sarve him right, too," cried Paul, as he hurried after his mate.

The hounds had evidently got on the scent, and led them towards the thicket at the bottom of the park.

While Alberic and Mowatt were considering what it would be the best to do under the circumstances, the head-keeper thought he could discover some persons in the neighbourhood of the mansion, and in order to attract their attention, he not only shouted lustily, but fired of one of the barrels of his gun.

The signal was quickly attended to. The persons whom the keeper had seen were some of the men-servants, who had been sent by May and Lady Rich-

borough to look for Mrs. Sutton. With them was Mr. Malham, the surgeon, who chanced to be at the house at the time.

Guided by the shouts and the report of the gun, the whole party were soon on the spot, and filled with consternation on learning the dreadful occurrence. Mr. Malham was profoundly affected. A glance at the body showed him that life was extinct, but still he knelt down to examine the wound.

By his direction a hurdle was brought, and on it was carefully laid the body, which he covered with his own ample cloak. Alberic was too much overcome to take part in the melancholy proceedings, and remained looking sadly on, with his arms folded upon his breast.

The little procession then moved slowly towards the mansion, the rear being brought up by Frank Mowatt and two grooms, who had charge of the prisoner.

Here we mention that Seth Cooper was captured by the two keepers in the thicket, and being taken by them to the hall, was lodged with his partner in guilt in an outbuilding until the arrival of the officers.

Meanwhile, Colonel Delacombe had arrived at Boxgrove, and was still in the entrance-hall with Mr. Radcliffe and Mr. Thornton. They had just been joined by May and Mrs. Woodcot, when the principal door was thrown open, and Mr. Malham came in, followed by the bearers with their ghastly burden. Behind them appeared Alberic.

Covered from head to foot by the cloak, as with a pall, the body was laid by the bearers on an antique carved oak table in the centre of the hall, above which hung a lamp.

As the body was brought in, Oswald came forth from the drawing-room, which opened upon the entrance-hall, and was immediately followed by Mrs. Radcliffe, Myrtille, and the Marquis of Hartlepool.

Astonishment and horror kept the throng of spectators mute, but the climax was reached when Colonel Delacombe stepped forward and drew aside the cloak that shrouded the pallid features of his wife.

Uttering a sharp cry, he would have fallen to the ground, if he had not been caught by the surgeon.

XVII.

An eventful Evening.

THERE months had elapsed.

The ill-fated Barbara had found a resting-place in the family vault of the Ilminsters, and her murderers had paid the penalty of their crime.

Colonel Delacombe was still at Boxgrove. The terrible shock he had undergone had well-nigh proved fatal. At last he rallied, but was for several weeks confined to his room.

A large state chamber was assigned him by Mr. Thornton, fitted up with antique furniture, and having bay windows that afforded him a view of the gardens and the park. There he sat in an easy chair, looking very pale, very thin, very feeble, but still very handsome; read the newspapers or a novel; dictated his letters to his son, or chatted with his visitors, of whom he had plenty.

For more than a month Alberic had been in constant attendance upon his sire, but since then he had been frequently in town. Mr. Thornton, who, as we know, played the part of host at Boxgrove, made him feel quite at home, and he went and came just as he liked.

May's engagement to the Marquis of Hartlepool

still subsisted. Owing to recent events the marriage had been postponed—indefinitely, it seemed, for no entreaties on the part of the marquis or Lady Richborough could induce the young lady to fix the day. Thoroughly impressed with the importance of the alliance, Mrs. Radcliffe prevented any positive rupture, though she could not bring about the consummation she desired. Mr. Radcliffe was secretly averse to the match, but would not withdraw the promise he had given to the marquis.

At length, the colonel came down-stairs, and a few drives in the open carriage completely restored him. A dinner-party was given to celebrate his recovery. It was a tolerably large party, but not at all formal, and comprised the Rev. Nisbet Jones and Mrs. Jones, Mrs. Clifford and her fair daughter Gwendoline, Mr. Brooke of Sandhills and his daughter Jessie, two or three young men, and most important of all, though we have placed him last in the list, the Marquis of Hartlepool. The marquis was staying at the time at Hazlemere. The members of the family consisted of Oswald and his mother, the Radcliffes, and, of course, Mr. Thornton, who did the honours for his grand-daughter.

May did not always dine with her guests—perhaps we ought to call them grandpapa's guests—but she favoured them on this occasion. Lady Richborough was likewise present, and Alberic.

The dinner was excellent, as the dinners always were at Boxgrove, and passed off very pleasantly.

Everybody was delighted to see Colonel Delacombe down-stairs again, and the colonel himself was in very good spirits, and ventured upon a glass of champagne, which he had not tasted since his illness.

But the Marquis of Hartlepool was really the life of the party. Placed between May and Myrtille, he not only managed to amuse them both by his pleasant sallies, but contributed materially to the general gaiety.

After dinner, the ladies strolled out into the garden to enjoy the delicious summer evening, and the young men, who did not care for the claret and still less for the old port, so dear to Mr. Thornton and Mr. Radcliffe, sallied forth to join them. Alberic, however, soon separated himself from the merry party on the lawn, and withdrew to a more secluded part of the garden. He was seated on a bench near a bosquet, wrapped in thought, when he was roused from his reverie by May.

"I have come to look for you," she said. "You must not desert us thus."

"I shall not contribute to your amusement," he replied in a melancholy voice. "I am out of spirits this evening, and cannot for the life of me shake off my despondency."

"I thought you looked extremely dull at dinner," she rejoined, "and wondered what was the matter. But come with me. We will soon chase away your gloom."

"Grant me a few moments," he cried, detaining her. "I have something to say to you."

"What is it?" she asked, taking a seat beside him.

"You will not be surprised at my sadness when I tell you that I have come to the resolution of bidding you farewell. To-morrow I shall leave Boxgrove—not to return. You cannot be unaware of the hopeless passion that consumes me. I have made every effort to conquer it—but in vain. Nothing is left me but to withdraw from the influence of an attraction that I find irresistible. I ought to have fled long ago, but I could not tear myself away. I shall suffer ten times more from the separation, which must now take place, than I should have done at an earlier period. I must, therefore, go while I have strength enough for the effort."

"No, Alberic," she replied. "I will not allow you to depart."

"You are very cruel. If you knew the torture I endure you would not bid me prolong it. Blissful as it is to be near you, the ever-recurring thought that I must lose you poisons my happiness, while the conviction that you will soon become the bride of another almost drives me mad."

"You must bear the torture a little longer."

"To what end?" he cried, bitterly. "There can be no hope for me. You are plighted to the marquis."

"He will give me back my word."

"Do not think it. He is resolved to make you his bride. Except your father, all the rest of your family, including Lady Richborough, are most anxious for the marriage. You have made a rash promise, and must perforce keep it."

"But I won't keep it!" exclaimed May, resolutely.

"Your father considers himself bound by his promise. The obligation is equally great on you."

"I will speak to the marquis to-night. I will appeal to his good feelings—to his generosity, to liberate me from a promise that was in reality extorted from me."

As she arose, two persons unexpectedly appeared before her.

The two persons were the marquis and Myrtille.

"When you have confidential matters to discuss you should not talk quite so loud," observed the marquis. "Lady Richborough and I have unwittingly heard all that has passed, and of course I am aware of the appeal you intended to make to me. On one condition, and one only will I release you from your promise."

"What is the condition?" cried May, eagerly.

"I do not think you will consider it very hard," he rejoined, with a smile. "The condition I exact is that you bestow the hand which you have promised to me on my friend, Alberic Delacombe. You have already, it appears, given him your heart."

Nothing could equal the astonishment of his hearers.

"My dear marquis!" exclaimed Alberic, transported with delight. "This generosity——"

"Is quite unexpected, I know. But you are rather mistaken in me. I am not altogether devoid of gratitude. Remember that you laid me under an everlasting obligation by saving my life at Rome. I am now able in part to requite it."

"You have requited it a thousand fold, my dear marquis," cried Alberic. "You have made me the happiest of men—that is, if the condition is accepted," he added to May.

"Very little doubt about that," said the marquis. "Still, to make sure, let us have a precise answer."

"There is my hand," cried May, giving it to Alberic, who pressed it to his lips.

"So the gipsy's prophecy will be fulfilled after all," said Myrtila. "You recollect what she told you at Ascot. But what will papa and mamma say to this sudden transfer of their daughter without consulting them? Above all, what will grandpapa say? I, too, have never been consulted, and I do not at all like losing the dear marquis."

"You may still keep him if you choose," said the marquis.

"Still keep him?"

"Yes. You promised to help me to a wife, and may still do so, if you are so inclined."

"Take care what you say, marquis," rejoined

Myrtilla. "I might construe that pretty speech into an offer."

"It is so meant. And I here, in plain terms, repeat it."

XVIII.

Sequel to the previous Chapter.

By this time the elderly gentlemen, who had remained rather longer over their wine than their juniors, had come forth upon the lawn, where the assemblage was broken up into little groups. Mr. Radcliffe and Mr. Thornton were discussing some political questions with the vicar, and Colonel Delacombe was expatiating on the beauty of the evening to Mrs. Radcliffe, when the marquis and the others were seen approaching.

"The marquis looks as if he had something to communicate," remarked the colonel. "I shouldn't wonder if the wedding-day were fixed."

"High time it should be," replied Mrs. Radcliffe. "I am quite tired of so much delay."

"Mrs. Radcliffe," said the marquis, stepping forward before the others, "I have to inform you that within the last few minutes a slight change has taken place in my arrangements with your daughter."

"A change!" exclaimed the lady. "You alarm me, marquis."

"No occasion for alarm, my dear madam," he rejoined, reassuring her with a smile. "But perhaps your husband ought to hear my communication."

"Mr. Radcliffe, your presence is required," cried the colonel.

"And mine, too, I suppose," said Mr. Thornton, whose curiosity was aroused.

"Shall I retire, marquis?" asked the colonel.

"On no account," replied the other. "You are an interested party. Mr. Radcliffe," he pursued, addressing that gentleman, who had come up with Mr. Thornton, "I will state to you in as few words as possible what I have to say. I cannot have the honour of becoming your son-in-law!"

"Oh! marquis, I did not expect this," almost screamed Mrs. Radcliffe.

"I presume, marquis, that you have some reasons for your withdrawal?" said Mr. Radcliffe, who did not look as discomposed as his wife.

"My reasons are not to be disputed," replied the marquis. "I have just discovered that your daughter entertains a preference for my friend, Alberic Delacombe, and I have therefore at once retired in his favour. You cannot oblige me more than by bestowing her hand upon him."

"My lord marquis," said Mr. Radcliffe, much moved, "I cannot sufficiently express my admiration of your conduct. It is worthy of you."

"Then you consent?" cried the marquis.

"What says Colonel Delacombe?" asked Mr. Radcliffe.

"Nothing would please me more," he rejoined, "I have long been aware of Alberic's attachment to

your daughter, and discouraged it because I considered it hopeless; but now that there is no obstacle I will ask your consent, and that of Mrs. Radcliffe, to the match."

"You have mine, colonel," replied Mr. Radcliffe.

"Am I dreaming?" cried Mrs. Radcliffe.

"No, my dear madam," replied the marquis, laughing; "both you and I have been dreaming for some time, but we are perfectly awake now. Make your daughter happy."

"Must I consent?" said Mrs. Radcliffe, appealing to Mr. Thornton."

"To be sure," replied the old gentleman. "Since things have taken this turn we must all consent."

The matter being thus satisfactorily settled, the young couple came forward and received the general felicitations of the assemblage.

"What a charming scene!" observed Lady Richborough to the marquis.

"Well, you have acted admirably, marquis," said the colonel, coming up. "But though my son is the gainer, I can't help feeling sorry for you."

"Spare your pity, my dear colonel. I am not so unlucky as you suppose. I have rather gained than lost, as I am sure you will admit when I inform you that Lady Richborough has promised me her hand."

"Then, indeed, you are to be envied, marquis, and I offer you my sincere congratulations. I almost wonder that her ladyship was not your original choice."

"The fault is Myrtilla's, not mine," said the marquis.

"How is the fault mine?" she asked.

"Have you not told me scores of times that you would never marry again?"

"Not since you were Marquis of Hartlepool. That makes all the difference. As a younger brother you know——"

"Precisely. I ought to have taken that into consideration. But I didn't. However, it's all right now."

Great was the astonishment of the assemblage when it was buzzed about that an engagement had just been entered into between the marquis and Lady Richborough, and a good deal of merriment was excited among the young people, who hardly knew whether to treat the matter seriously or not. When convinced of the truth of the announcement, they thought that the whole thing must have been planned, and indeed it looked like it.

When Colonel Delacombe looked for his son he had disappeared. May also was gone. They had wandered together towards the most secluded part of the garden, where they could pour out their thoughts without restraint, and interchange their vows. But the boundless love that each felt for the other found but feeble and inadequate expression in words. Alberic could only tell May that he loved her better than life—that he had always loved her—and should never cease to love her, while life lasted. And with this assurance she was content.

Nothing half so sentimental passed between the Marquis of Hartlepool and Lady Richborough. They had a long tête-à-tête, it is true, but they did not talk of love. The marquis made no protestations of undying affection, nor did he indulge in common-places of any kind which he knew very well she would not care to hear; but he spoke about his plans for the autumn, for the winter, and for the spring, and quite satisfied her that it would be a very charming thing to be Marchioness of Hartlepool.

It is almost needless to say that the change that had occurred was a great disappointment to Mrs. Radcliffe and Mr. Thornton. They had looked forward to the alliance which was to reflect so much splendour upon themselves as a matter of certainty, and now that there was an end of it, their vanity underwent a severe shock. There was some slight consolation in reflecting that the marquis was not altogether lost, since Myrtille had secured him.

However, before the end of the evening the old gentleman's thoughts were turned into another channel. Almost all the company had returned to the drawing-room, where music was going on, when Mrs. Woodcot asked for a song from Jessie Brooke, who had a charming voice. The young lady, however, was still on the terrace with Oswald. Mr. Brooke called his daughter in, but when she came, she begged Mrs. Radcliffe to excuse her from singing, pleading a slight cold. Mr. Thornton had some suspicions of the truth, and they

were soon confirmed by Oswald, who took him aside, and said:

"Well, sir, I've been and done it."

"Been and done what?"

"Followed your advice, sir. You told me to propose to Jessie Brooke."

"I don't recollect telling you so."

"Yes, sir, you did. You told me she would accept me, and you were right. You added—and I thought it extremely considerate on your part—that you would make a handsome settlement upon her, and a liberal allowance to me. I hope you'll be as good as your word."

"Well, I suppose I must have made the promise, though I've quite forgotten it," replied the old gentleman, with a comical look that quite satisfied his grandson. "I'll go and talk the matter over with Mr. Brooke, and ascertain what he'll do."

"You are the best of granddads," cried the grateful youth.

This is the last event we have to record of that eventful evening, when an engagement was no sooner broken off than two others were formed, and a third entered into immediately afterwards.

XIX.

How the Gipsy's Prophecy was fulfilled.

NEVER sure was man happier than Alberic. Fortune, that so long had frowned upon him, had now bestowed her choicest favours—had given him a name, an excellent social position, and for a bride, the loveliest and wealthiest girl in the county. Not a wish was ungratified.

And May was just as happy. We have shown that she did not care for rank and splendour, and had she been condemned to such a life would have been wretched. Even Mrs. Radcliffe and Mr. Thornton came to this conclusion after they had got over their first disappointment, and felt that things had been much better ordered by fate than they could have ordered them.

As to Colonel Delacombe, he was almost as happy as his son. If he could have selected a wife for Alberic he would have chosen May, but he deemed the prize unattainable.

Let us here state that the marquis had no reason to regret that he had yielded to his generous impulses. With his tastes and with his mode of existence, it is perfectly clear that May would not have suited him, and would very soon have been neglected and un-

happy. But Myrtila had every qualification for the brilliant part which she was called upon to play. As Marchioness of Hartlepool she speedily eclipsed all her competitors in the world of fashion, and reached the pinnacle of her ambition.

Nor has she been dethroned. No parties so splendid, so attractive, as hers. Her toilettes are perfection—her equipages the most elegant in town. Wherever she appears, the haughty marchioness dazzles all beholders. Her superb beauty excites universal admiration. Yet with all her pride she is popular, for she is good-natured, and can be condescending when she pleases. Not without reason is the marquis proud of her. Not without reason does he congratulate himself on his choice of a consort. If he has ennobled her, she has materially heightened his influence and importance.

It only remains to conduct Alberic and May to the altar. Preparations for the marriage were made as expeditiously as possible, and caused a busy time both at Boxgrove and Hazlemere. Some little delay occurred, since it was arranged that the marriage of Oswald with Jessie Brooke should take place on the same day.

At last, however, all preliminary arrangements were completed. The settlements were made, and were entirely satisfactory to those principally concerned. Mr. Thornton behaved very liberally to his grandson, and settled upon the young lady, whom Oswald had chosen, a sum equal to that given her by her father.

The two marriages were celebrated, under the most auspicious circumstances, at Wootton Church—the ceremonies being performed by the vicar.

Bright sunshine gladdened the hearts of those collected in the precincts of the ancient fabric to witness the arrival of the wedding parties. All the bridesmaids were extremely pretty, and charmingly dressed, and Jessie Brooke looked remarkably well, but an irrepressible murmur of admiration burst from the throng as May stepped from the carriage, and was led by her father towards the antique porch, along a path strewn with flowers.

How exquisitely beautiful she looked in her bridal attire! And her beauty was of a kind to produce the greatest effect upon those who pressed forward to gaze upon her. They were charmed by the sweetness of her looks, as well as by her rare loveliness. Audible wishes for her happiness in her married life accompanied her in her progress.

Amid these expressions of heartfelt interest, which could not fail to move her, she entered the sacred building, and, still led by her father, passed along the crowded aisle—crowded with kindly faces—to the altar, where a large assemblage was already collected.

A wedding in a country church is always a pretty sight, if there is any interest in the bridegroom and bride, but the double wedding we are now describing formed one of the prettiest pictures imaginable.

No handsomer couple than Alberic and May ever knelt before the altar; and our stalwart friend Oswald

and his fair young bride were also noticeable for their good looks. A bevy of as lovely bridesmaids as could well be brought together surrounded them. Among the principal figures was Mr. Radcliffe, who stood beside his daughter, and who seemed much affected. Near him was Mrs. Radcliffe. On the other side were Mrs. Woodcot and Mr. Thornton. But by far the most striking personage in the group was Colonel Delacombe, whose tall, thin, military figure towered above those around him.

As the newly-married couples returned to the carriages that were waiting for them at the gates, amid the joyous pealing of the bells, there was quite a tumult in the churchyard. Alberic then came in for his share of admiration, and everybody declared that he was worthy of his lovely bride.

There were great festivities that day at Hazle mere. The wedding-breakfast was splendid, the long tables being decorated with flowers and choicest fruit. There was the usual speech-making, by far the best speech being made by the worthy vicar.

After the repast, a couple of carriages, each having four horses, drew up near the hall-door. In the foremost Alberic and his bride set out for Tunbridge Wells, en route for Como; while the other conveyed Oswald and his bride to Dorking, whence they intended to proceed to Scotland.

After a delicious sojourn of a couple of months at Bellagio, Alberic and his wife returned to Boxgrove.

Though they had never tired of the scenery of the lovely Italian lake, they were not sorry to get back. Boxgrove had charms for them that no other place could offer, and they would not quit it again during the ensuing winter or spring, though tempted by repeated invitations from the Marquis and Marchioness of Hartlepool.



L'ENVOY.

LITTLE more has to be recorded.

The Radcliffes still reside at Hazlemere, which is kept up as well as ever. Mr. Radcliffe is not quite so active as he used to be, but otherwise in good case. Mrs. Radcliffe still describes herself as an invalid.

Mrs. Woodcot has left Boxgrove, and resides with Oswald and his wife in the neighbourhood of Chester, where grandpapa has bought them a very pretty place.

Mr. Thornton himself, who is still very hearty, and can get through a bottle of port after dinner without feeling any inconvenience from it next morning, passes his time between Hazlemere and Boxgrove, though he sometimes pays a visit to his grandson.

Colonel Delacombe, we regret to say, is gone. He died in India, whither he had returned.

The most important change remains to be mentioned. By the influence of the Marquis of Hartlepool, and in consideration of the large landed property he has derived by his marriage, our fortunate hero has been elevated to the dignity of a baronet, and has assumed the name

of the ancient family to which he belongs on his mother's side. He is now SIR ALBERIC DELACOMBE ILMINSTER, Bart., of Boxgrove.

THE END.



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